

I. Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide the Town Council recommendations from our study of the prospects for redeveloping the Mill Plaza property – a nearly 10 acre parcel flanked by the University of New Hampshire campus, Main Street, and the faculty residential neighborhood – in the heart of Durham. These recommendations were developed over the past year with the citizens of Durham carried out by a partnership between the Mill Plaza Study Committee and members of the New Hampshire chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIANH). AIANH awarded Durham a grant of pro-bono design and consultation services in April, 2007 as part of the “Blueprint for America” initiative – a yearlong observation marking the 150th anniversary of the founding of AIA. The town/AIA150 collaboration was undertaken with the encouragement of John Pinto, the owner of the Mill Plaza property. Together with the Town-Council-appointed Mill Plaza Study Committee (MPSC), AIANH worked with a team of professional partners including PlanNH, The Jordan Institute, Granite State Landscape Architects, and the NH Preservation Alliance.

MPSC Recommendations in Detail

1. Work Together for Success

Over the past year, the Durham community – the Mill Plaza Study Committee, the Library Board of Trustees, the Town Administrator, and hundreds of residents – with their partners in the AIANH 150 Team, embarked on a challenging and exciting process to envision the future of the Mill Plaza site. Through dozens of meetings, focus groups, design charettes, and economic and environmental analysis, the community has collectively envisioned a future for the current site that can be commercially viable, well-designed, and integrated with the fabric of the town. This is a major accomplishment. However, the process is not done.

Critical unfinished business remains: continuing to engage the property owner and his developer in a substantive effort to align interests as this vision moves to the concrete submittal of documents for formal town approval. To this end, we recommend that the town retain a core membership of the AIANH150 team at the completion of the work to carry on the community’s vision. This highly skilled, professional team – deeply knowledgeable about the site, New England development and design, and the wishes of Durham’s citizens – would serve at the behest of the Town Council to:

- ✓ Advocate for the vision developed with the community through the MPSC/ AIANH150 process
- ✓ Interact with the owner and his developer to discuss design issues and considerations, and through further dialogue, integrate the community’s wishes with the property owner’s needs *before* the official application process begins.

2. Create a Village Center with Quality Design

We recommend that the Plaza should, in broad terms, be redeveloped as a “Village Center.” Thus, mixed uses from retail to office to housing, linkages to Main Street, multiple forms of access (car, bus, pedestrian, bike), public and open space, and connection to College Brook are all important. A new and improved “shopping mall” is not our intent, though we recognize the importance of retail as the key element of successful mixed use.



We recommend public spaces that provide a pleasant and interesting experience while walking through the site, and also recommend gathering places for such events as concerts, discussions, performances, and other activities.

We believe the redevelopment should link visually and spatially with Main Street, as well as Mill Road and the UNH campus to encourage pedestrian flow between town, campus, and the adjoining neighborhoods. For that reason, we recommend that the development “wrap” business uses/buildings around from Main Street to Mill Road to increase retail along these two major roads, better connect Main Street and Mill Road, increase pedestrian traffic, and provide a visual buffer between Mill Road the site.

With the help of the AIANH150 team, we developed an evaluation matrix that includes Durham, AIANH 150/2030 Challenge, and LEED-ND (Leadership and Energy and Environmental Design for Neighborhood Development) principles (See Section III). LEED-ND integrates the principles of smart growth, new urbanism, and green building into a system for neighborhood design. LEED-ND criteria provide a measure of how the location, site planning, and design of buildings and grounds of a proposed development meet accepted high levels of environmentally responsible and sustainable development, smart growth, and energy efficiency (www.usgbc.org and then LEED-ND). To address concerns consistently raised by Durham residents, any proposed project should use the evaluation matrix throughout the development process to test proposed design features against such criteria.

Lastly, we recommend that designers of the redevelopment pay attention to such details as the eclectic surrounding architectural styles, building heights, articulation, and other design features.

3. Promote a Balanced Mix of Uses

The redevelopment should broaden Durham’s tax base through both the commercial and aesthetic value it adds. Ideally, this should be achieved through a balanced mix of uses to feature an expanded grocery store, retail shops, offices, and new housing to make for a more vibrant downtown and commercially successful center for the property owner. In addition to a drug store and an expanded grocery store, we recommend the following uses:

Housing

We believe that housing needs to be a part of the redevelopment. Though some on the Committee would generally prefer non-student housing, we recognize that it can be difficult to prescribe types of housing, especially over longer periods of time. Thus, we encourage

that any housing – student, workforce, or senior housing – be built sufficiently distant from current residential neighborhoods, perhaps on or near Main Street.

Office Space

We recommend office space as a key element of the mixed uses on the site. Office space can generate meaningful tax revenues, is likely marketable in this region, and can provide a cluster of services needed by Durham residents and UNH faculty and students. We encourage office uses that have evening as well as daytime hours to promote activity during the evening.



Other Retail

We recommend the design “wrap” a variety of retail businesses – such as a restaurant and a bookstore – from Main Street around to Mill Road in order to better connect the Mill Plaza site with the Main Street retail establishments.

4. Balance Site Access & Flow

The redevelopment should balance automobile, bicycle, mass transit, and pedestrian access while ensuring the commercial viability of businesses on the site.

Pedestrian

We recommend there be numerous pedestrian access points and paths that tie the grocery store other parts of the site to one another as well as to Main Street, the University, and neighborhoods. These paths should be inviting, well designed, and take practical account of pedestrians’ current and likely future use of the site.

Bicycle

We recommend a bike path be available on at least the buffer/park along College Brook and that sufficient bike racks and storage facilities be provided in various locations to ensure site users are encouraged to bike. This might mean a bike storage facility in part of any parking garage, for instance.

Traffic Flow

We recommend a continuous road be developed through the site from Mill Road to Main Street.

Commercial Loading/Unloading

We recommend loading zones and dumpsters be hidden from public view and that noise and glare be buffered to the greatest extent possible.

Parking

We recommend that the site have sufficient parking to support the proposed mixed uses. At the same time, we recommend that the final design avoid a single large “ocean” of parking as currently configured.

We recommend greater use of vegetation and trees, “sunk” islands rather than elevated ones for trees/vegetation, parking areas broken up among different spaces and buildings, and the construction, if necessary, of a parking structure.

We strongly recommend that any parking structure serve Main Street also, and be masked or covered through various design techniques (such as wrapping buildings around) so that it does not visually dominate the overall development.

5. Include a New Town Library

We strongly support providing space for a new town library on the site. This would bring more potential customers to the Plaza during daytime, weekend, and evening hours, provide a long-standing, secure anchor for the site, and create valuable civic space. The Committee supports the Library Board of Trustees’ desire to begin this portion of redevelopment as quickly as possible and asks that the library be included in Phase I of any redevelopment. The library trustees and town should enter into negotiations with the property owner about the terms and cost of siting the library permanently in the Plaza in a way that meets all parties’ interests.



Siting the new library in the southeast corner of the property would create a vibrant new public space for our community and our children in the near term. This would also serve as a community-oriented catalyst for future development of the site. The siting of the library at this location would allow for non-motorized access and green space around the library, and would provide a permanent, non-motorized buffer between Faculty Neighborhood and the Plaza.

6. Respect the Neighborhood

For the sake of thoroughness and fairness, we asked the AIANH150 design teams to consider opening vehicular access via Chesley Drive – despite the long history of political and environmental opposition in Durham to such a move and a recommendation in Durham’s 2000 Master Plan against it. After independently studying the idea, the design teams recommended against opening Chesley Drive to vehicles for several reasons, among

them: 1) it would negatively impact a natural, pleasant feature of the current site; 2) it would pose numerous additional traffic challenges including increased traffic not only on Chesley Drive, but on the roads that lead into it; 3) it might adversely affect College Brook; 4) it would likely require property takings and other difficult actions; and, 5) a second vehicular access at Main Street presents a better design alternative.

We recommend the wooded path and wetland at the southeast corner of the site be maintained as a buffer to the adjacent Faculty Neighborhood. This would preserve the existing pedestrian and bicycle gateway to the neighborhood via Chesley Drive. The existing buffer might be secured through construction of buildings, establishment of permanent open space, wooded paths, and/or a playground.

The Committee considered a number of designs and obtained the input of Faculty Road residents to determine what kinds of design features or mitigations would meet their interests, including: 1) enhancing the College Brook as a buffer to the residential neighborhood; 2) designing lighting that does not shine into the residential neighborhood; 3) buffering the residential neighborhood visually and acoustically from new loading docks; 4) siting any new student housing closer to Main Street.

7. Protect College Brook and Its Buffer

We recommend that public space be provided along College Brook for: 1) a brookside park for walking, biking, and other activities; 2) access between neighborhoods, the Plaza, and the University; and, 3) key functions such as flood storage, water filtration, and wildlife habitat. This brookside park should incorporate curves and other features to appear more natural.

The Committee further encourages “low impact” designs incorporating features such as rain gardens, natural swales, permeable asphalt, retention ponds, underground filtration systems, and roof gardens to effectively and more naturally manage storm water. More detailed ideas can be found in the College Brook Report prepared for the Committee.



We recommend a vegetated buffer that offers open space, natural filtering, and other functions between the brook, riparian area, and Plaza of at least 25 feet, where possible. In any case, the buffer should be no less than at present. We strongly recommend considering the brook, buffer, and site itself as a single integrated whole to avoid separations and distinctions that would reduce the aesthetic and functional value of either the brook or the built environment at the Plaza.

Understanding that the brook’s overall health is also affected by uses and constraints beyond the Plaza, we encourage all neighbors to the brook – including UNH – to pursue opportunities to help restore the brook’s multiple natural functions.