

To: Town of Durham Planning Board

From: Brookside Commons Condo Association

Date: 5 February 2016

RE: Proposed Mill Plaza Redevelopment Project

Brookside Commons, our over-55 community of 12 homes, immediately abuts the Mill Plaza shopping complex, along our entire north edge. Whether deliberately or not, we seem mostly absent from the preliminary drawings. Also, we feel that the developers, acting in good faith, might have met with us, outside the legality of a public hearing, to hear our thoughts and concerns about a project that will have significant impact on our quality of life as well as property values. This in itself is very worrisome to us and indicates a disregard for our community.

We engage with the Planning Board today in the hope our concerns will be heard and addressed, and that our community will be taken into account as the planning process continues.

In many ways, our proximity to Mill Plaza is a great convenience and positive force for us, providing a variety of shopping and service functions in a livable walkable community. Many of us were excited by the potential for the redevelopment of Mill Plaza as illustrated by the concepts and drawings of the 2008 Mill Plaza Study Committee and AIA-NH. Central to the conclusions of that extensive professional planning charrette were such ideas as creating a Village Center, increasing green space and people space downtown, providing more services, helping restore and protect College Brook and its buffers, possible workforce/senior/family/low-income (and not *more* student) housing, improving the architecture of the area, moving toward more sustainable practice, and other small-town, neighborhood and long-term amenities.

We are still hopeful, at this early stage of design, that these goals can begin to show up on paper. However, we are deeply disturbed by the initial plans submitted thus far by the development team. Over the past year, from our perspective as immediate abutters to this project, the plans submitted have moved from bad to appalling.

Our primary concerns as the preliminary design phase moves forward include the list below. Some of these problems currently exist, but will be significantly exacerbated in the proposed design.

- **Noise pollution** on our property will increase significantly, as a result of increased traffic and the concentration of vehicular flow adjacent to our community, reflected off of multi-story buildings into our homes.
- **The placement of residential units directly abutting our community**, likely housing an entirely student population, will significantly impact our quality of life.
- We are seriously concerned about the **increased vehicular traffic** coming and going to residences and businesses. With a 60% increase in commercial space and 330 (500?) new residential tenants, traffic past our driveway and across our pedestrian access to Mill Plaza will increase dramatically. The Mill Plaza entrance is already a safety and accident hotspot, and will

only be worse with the proposed expansion. A traffic light will certainly be needed, which will seriously compromise our ability to exit and enter our driveway which is close to the Plaza entrance.

- **College Brook:** this plan begins to acknowledge the resource, potential and fragility of College Brook as a functioning riverine system feeding into Mill Pond, the Oyster River, Little Bay and Great Bay. We share College Brook with Mill Plaza. For the first time, the developers have presented a plan that includes a wetland buffer, required by town, state and federal jurisdictions. We would like to see additional protections, including extensive pervious paving, roof gardens, infiltration and filtration areas to intercept runoff bursts and allow natural infiltration and water cleaning processes.
- Directly related to College Brook and runoff is the **snow removal** procedure. Since its inception, Mill Plaza has used sand and salt in tons each winter, and additionally has plowed almost all the snow and its contained salt and sand off the south edge of the asphalt and into the Brook. This must end. Water pollution here is serious. Also the vegetation along the south side of the Plaza is damaged each winter by snowplows, and each summer by salt accumulation. An indicator of the severity of sand is that our open-water pond, created in 1985, has almost totally silted in.
- We are hopeful that a **maintenance program for the landscape** of Mill Plaza will be designed and applied in perpetuity as a part of the planning and approval process. Litter and trash originating at Mill Plaza and ending up on our property will increase significantly. Maintenance of plantings at Mill Plaza has been absent in the past: Most of the trees in the parking areas are thirty years old, yet they have not grown five feet in those years and are obviously unhealthy and misshapen. When plantings are installed, they will need to be maintained.
- **Fire safety** is not a direct concern to us, but we worry about the safety of greatly expanded residents and businesses in this confined space with limited fire access.
- **Light pollution** is a concern now, and will be worse with the proposed expansion. We suggest lighting that is more focused (away from us) and less diffuse and multi-directional.
- **Scale** is an aesthetic consideration for us as in-the-viewshed abutters and for anyone visiting the area. First the scale of the entire development seems excessive in a restricted space in the center of Durham. Second, the simply odd scaling of the various buildings in relation to each other: it makes no aesthetic spatial sense. Third, the scale of the built environment (buildings, asphalt, concrete) seems excessive relative to the scale of the natural environment. And fourth, the buildings are out of scale with the buildings we live in at Brookside Commons.

In summary, our property values and quality of life will be harmed significantly by the proposed redevelopment.

In the 2008 professional charrette the Mill Plaza area was suggested as the **“Village Center”** – a community gathering spot, a place where events occur, where townsfolk can gather in a pleasant environment. Over the past two years, all proposals submitted by the developers have been spectacularly devoid of any such concept. If this opportunity is lost now, it will not come back for many decades. We have the good fortune to design today what could be a Durham centerpiece. We hope this opportunity to do it right will not be sacrificed to speed and tunnel-vision.

We are hopeful that the developers will now take a step back, consider the interests of abutters and the broader community, and create a proposal that we can all support and be proud of, which enhances our town. Our community has a couple of suggestions:

- A three-story building plus higher roofline (Bldg B) about 100 feet from our Mill Road homes will be a huge aesthetic and view-shed negative for our community. We would strongly suggest that this building and/or contents be totally relocated on the site, possibly by increasing the footprint or height of other buildings proposed. Note again the agreement to locate housing on the north side of the Mill Plaza site.
- Move Hannaford's to Bldg C along with other commercial interests; replace the current one-story Hannaford's building with a four-story residential building; eliminate Building B, moving those functions into a larger Building D. A new Hannaford's could also be in a new building parallel to Mill Road.

We thank you for the opportunity to voice our concerns, and we hope the final plan will resolve most if not all of our concerns.

Signed,

Rosemary Thomson	owner, Unit 1
Donald Padgett	owner, Unit 3
Pamela Bapp	tenant, Unit 4
Diane Zirkle	owner, Unit 5
Holly Zirkle	owner, Unit 5
Willard Merrill	owner, Unit 6
Steve Merrill	owner, Unit 7
Melodye Merrill	owner, Unit 7
Carol Knox	owner, Unit 8
John Hart	owner, Unit 9
Barbara Siegert	owner, Unit 10
Martha Smith	owner, Unit 11
Wesley Smith	owner, Unit 11
Jean McPeak	owner, Unit 12
Mark McPeak	owner, Unit 12