

Date: February 8, 2016
To: Durham Planning Board
From: Homeowners on Chesley Drive
Re: Preliminary Proposal to Redevelop the Mill Plaza

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board,

We are writing collectively, as all the homeowners on Chesley Drive in the Faculty Neighborhood, to offer our comments on the preliminary proposal before the Planning Board for the redevelopment of the Mill Plaza by Colonial Durham Associates. Given the addition of up to 330 residential beds, per the recent legal settlement, this proposal is subject to the Town's conditional use criteria for Mixed Use in the Central Business District. As you know, these conditional use criteria take into account the impact on abutting properties and the adjacent neighborhood.

First, we want to emphasize that the Mill Plaza is an important asset to us and to the entire Faculty Neighborhood. It is a pleasure to be able to walk to shop at the Plaza, regardless of weather and road conditions. At the Plaza, we almost always run into local and more distant Durham neighbors, see friends and acquaintances from Lee, Newmarket, Madbury, and other nearby towns as well as staff and faculty from UNH who frequently shop at the Plaza regardless of where they live. It is also pleasant to see the vibrancy of youth that college student shoppers and college-age store staff add to the Plaza experience. Indeed, the Plaza offers a range of mixed age groups difficult to find in other settings in Durham or elsewhere. Young children from every corner of our neighborhood are able to use the Thompson Lane to Chesley Marsh path through the woods and over the College Brook Bridge to walk safely into the Plaza (and through it to our Durham schools). And, at the other end of the age spectrum, the Plaza is also a safe walk from the senior housing at Church Hill and for seniors in private homes throughout the Faculty Neighborhood. The Plaza could certainly benefit from thoughtful redevelopment. Yet it functions quite well, as it is, as a Town Commons. It serves our functional needs for acquiring food, medicines, and other goods, as well as our community needs for frequent social interaction.

We would love to see a redevelopment plan that builds on the current value that the Plaza brings to us as abutters and to the Town overall. We are excited by the vision developed by the diverse mix of constituencies in the 2008 Mill Plaza Study for a "Village Center." Unfortunately, just about the only feature of the proposal now before the Planning Board that speaks to that vision is the *name* given to it by the developers: "Durham Village Center."

Although there are a few promising components to the current plan (more protected brook and wetland buffers and some proposed added green spaces, for example), the current plan includes some terrible features:

< > Adding a claustrophobia-inducing three-story building along the entrance road that would block the visibility of, and access to, the anchor Hannaford grocery store. (The plan entails blocking all but one of the 6-7 current lanes of access to the grocery store.) The placement and height of this building is also highly disrespectful to our neighbors at Brookside Commons.

< > Proposing a crowded layout that will likely lead to “traffic jams” in the Plaza by creating basically a single route to be shared by customer and student-resident cars, emergency vehicles, delivery trucks, and snow plows.

< > Dramatically reducing parking for customers of the Plaza while increasing the commercial space by over 50% (thereby creating the need for *more* parking, rather than less). This planned scarcity of parking for shoppers surely threatens the economic viability of this central business area that so many of us rely on, since it will send the non-walking customers to other locations to shop, including stores in other towns.

< > Leaving in place the most run-down building (the northern-most structure, with Hannaford, Rite Aid, Bella’s) and keeping it as a single-story structure (when both sense and the settlement would suggest a multi-level structure building there), while otherwise starting with a blank slate for the entire site, and crowding the Plaza with new three- and four-story structures that are out of scale with the surrounding neighborhood and not even in visual and spatial harmony with each other.

< > Destroying the only current green gathering place in the Plaza, the grassy spot with a half-dozen mature trees next to The Works bagel eatery and filling in that long-valued spot with a two-story structure that will loom over the sidewalk along Mill Road and will block the potential for public-space connections with the Pauly building’s pocket park and proposed added green space in the Plaza further down Mill Road.

Worst of all, however, is the transformation of the Plaza from a commercial and communal gathering place into a major housing development, almost certainly student housing. The idea of reserving most of the parking at the Plaza for new student residents is very troubling as customer difficulty in finding parking will threaten the basic viability of the Plaza as a Town-wide commercial center, with it possibly devolving over time into merely a student-housing annex to the university campus across the street, and another lost civic space for the citizens of the Town.

Of particular concern to us on Chesley Drive and to the Faculty Neighborhood at large, however, is that most of the proposed student housing (over 200 beds of the maximum

330 permitted) has been designated for the rear of the Plaza (what for many of us is the *front* of the Plaza, since neighborhood residents of all ages enter the Plaza there). The current plan places three- and four-story buildings with 76 beds and 126 beds, respectively, adjacent to the pedestrian entrance to our neighborhood and within sight of some of the residential properties on Chesley Drive and quite visible from the cherished wooded path that goes from the Chesley Marsh to Thompson Lane and is heavily used by neighborhood schoolchildren as well as adults. This placement does not reflect a good-faith effort to respect the legal settlement that indicates that every effort would be made to place housing in the “northern half of the property” – which is *furthest away* from the southern pedestrian entrance to our neighborhood!

It does not take much reflection to realize how the proximity of what will functionally be a 200-student college dorm (on private property, and thus not routinely patrolled by Town or UNH police) will affect the adjacent family neighborhood and the wetland and wooded area that serves as a fragile, protective buffer separating our family neighborhood from the commercial core and current student housing beyond. Other parts of Town have already suffered from proximity to mass student housing, with declining lifestyle and property values. We do not wish to be next in line.

In the Faculty Neighborhood, we already have some difficulty with a small number of college students drifting into the neighborhood’s only wooded path for drinking, smoking tobacco and marijuana, and other activities not compatible with a family path and neighborhood. We can easily imagine what adding a concentrated mass of students within sight of this tempting area will do to increase these problems. Clearing away beer cans and bottles and other debris will likely become a constant “maintenance” activity for us. We are also concerned about how the daily experience of our young children walking to and from school through the Plaza will be transformed by having to pass by potentially large groups of college students, who sometimes shout inappropriate comments at young children and teens. Although we wish it were not so, the demonstrated fact in Durham and elsewhere is that family living and adjacent mass student housing are not compatible with each other.

The proposal, as it stands now, does not pass the criteria of conditional use. The proposed housing would negatively affect our adjacent property values and lifestyle. We in the Faculty Neighborhood and on Chesley Drive, in particular, are likely to suffer from increased noise, loud music, odors, trash, long “hours of operation” (as in late-night student parties on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights), and degradation of our fragile wetland buffer and the College Brook Greenway that follows the path of our street. Additionally, the mass of the proposed structures is out of scale for the abutting neighborhood. If there is to be development at the rear of the Plaza it should be related to activities that quiet down at night, as does a family neighborhood, and that are not associated with frequent disruptive or illegal activities.

We respectfully ask the Planning Board to consider our concerns and to reject the proposed plans as currently submitted (as well as any broadly similar amended proposals) because of their incompatibility with the recent settlement, their being in violation of conditional use criteria that protect adjacent properties, their not reflecting common sense, and their not being in the economic or social interests of the Town.

Sincerely,

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