

12 June 2017

Durham Planning Board  
Town Hall  
Durham NH 03824

Dear Planning Board:

Many of the concerns I've voiced over the years of public hearings regarding the Mill Plaza redevelopment have had to do with moral, social, cultural, aesthetic and ecological issues: Trying to get the best development for the Town of Durham, something which will enhance our lives over the next fifty years. In my view these issues have been buried repeatedly by financial considerations. So again in the June 2017 iteration, we have the most extensive build-out possible with the fewest amenities and a hypothetical maximum profit. I understand that, sadly, the property owner has the legal right to do that.

However, this project in its current form appears to require a Conditional Use Permit, and frankly I cannot conceive of it receiving this authorization as presented. There are serious questions regarding 1) site suitability, 2) external impacts on abutters and the neighborhood, 3) the character of the development, 4) the character of the buildings, 5) preservation of natural and scenic resources, 6) impact on property values, and 7) fiscal impacts. In my opinion, the project fails each and all of these tests, some rather horrifically.

But I want to address just one of these issues here, the preservation (or lack thereof) of natural and scenic resources. In addition to being a certified abutter, I also have some expertise in this area. I hold a masters degree in resource ecology and a second masters degree in landscape architecture. I've been an active member of the America Society of Landscape Architects for 25 years. I have over 40 years of experience in grounds and parks maintenance and management, including a stint as deputy director of horticulture in Central Park (the one in New York City). So there are some notches on the handle of my ecological and landscape six-gun.

What has been done to College Brook over the decades – by the Town, by the University, and by commercial enterprises – is criminal. In the past, “criminal” was metaphorical, but now such degradation is criminal in actuality. Regarding the Mill Plaza preliminary site plan of June 2017, I have several recommendations:

1) This is a once-in-50-year opportunity to correct past errors by moving construction to or beyond the 75-foot wetland buffer line. As designed, this buffer is largely covered in asphalt – as I said, criminal. Using that space as an actual wetland buffer would accomplish several positive outcomes. If properly restored, it would:

- Provide a significant natural buffer for the College Brook;
- Allow for infiltration of surface runoff water from the massive asphalt parking area;
- Similarly, allow space for rain gardens/bioswales, mitigating the need for most of the designed rain gardens and permeable paving, although those are still good ideas;
- Allow for diversion of pollutants from College Brook (salt, sand, petroleum and other chemical products from vehicles, fertilizers and chemicals from planting areas, etc.);
- Provide horizontal space for significant plantings which would help screen and buffer abutting properties and the neighborhood from visual pollution, noise pollution, litter, etc.;
- Increase biodiversity and carbon sequestration;
- Increase aesthetic value and possibly adjacent property values;

- Provide sufficient space for seating, picnic tables, a pedestrian pathway, and a bike path.

2) The 75-foot wetland buffer seems legal. Variances might reduce this width and still allow significant ecological, aesthetic and cultural advantages.

3) The preliminary site plan of June 2017, to its credit, does show minimal square-footage of roof gardens, rain gardens, and permeable paving. Barring (1) above, these should be increased in size, number, and capacity, based on research recommendations from UNH's Stormwater Research Center (a 10-minute walk from Mill Plaza), which should be consulted in any case. They are doing nationally recognized work on ecological solutions to surface drainage and stormwater.

4) This site plan is preliminary, but the areas shown to be vegetated are extremely small and disconnected. These tiny fragments of plants and plant groupings will have an ecological impact approaching zero, and a very short life span. The currently stressed and dying vegetation at Mill Plaza is grim testimony to poor planting design, installation and maintenance. Mill Plaza is a wholly urban setting and demands modern urban planting design and constructed soil media, and planting areas suitable for multiple layers of vegetation (canopy and sub-canopy trees, shrubs, perennials, groundcovers, and compost mulch) in much more expansive planting areas.

5) A snow removal concept needs to be included, with sustainable techniques of removal.

6) A long-term sustainable maintenance plan for all planted areas must be created and then implemented.

7) Outdoor lighting should be the minimum to ensure safety, and the light should be kept on site with minimal spillage into the neighborhood.

8) The pond in College Brook, near the northeastern corner of 13 Mill Road (Brookside Commons) must be dredged and restored. The sand load from Mill Plaza runoff has filled in this pond almost completely over the past 30 years. I've been told that Mill Plaza did dredge this once in the 1990's. The spoils can be utilized in the 75-foot wetland buffer to provide a free substrate for planting.

9) Scenic resources will be lost with the removal of areas currently forested and the removal of many cubic yards of granite ledge.

10) I worry that the current site plan, with a large 3-story building very close to my living room and adjacent to my backyard, will reduce the sales value of my property, not to mention the aesthetic contamination.

These are my recommendations with regards to natural and scenic resources. Without these adjustments in the site plan, to my mind this project cannot support a Conditional Use Permit by the Town of Durham. I remain hopeful and even excited about the prospect for a new improved Mill Plaza, but not as currently proposed.

Sincerely,

John L. Hart ASLA  
13 Mill Road #9, Durham NH