

February 10, 2016

Re: The Mill Plaza Redevelopment Project

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board:

I respectfully submit my comments regarding the January 21 Mill Plaza Redevelopment Plan. Allow me to be forthright.

**1. Demise of the Village Center**

To call the proposed Plan the “Durham Village Center” is an insult to residents and to the Mill Plaza Study Committee who spent long hours working to develop several options that met the needs of a wide range of community interests. This current plan would be more appropriately named: University East Edge Mall. I say this because with the reduction of parking for the commercial enterprises by almost 2/3<sup>rds</sup> (from 345-126 spaces as indicated by Mr. McCauley at the EDC meeting), and the dedication of 234 spaces for tenants (most likely students), there won’t be enough parking for townspeople to shop, therefore they will stop shopping at the Plaza. Thus the only businesses that will be able to survive will be those serving foot traffic, i.e. mostly students. Thus we will be inadvertently promulgating more pizza and beer establishments.

**2. The Plan does not live up to the Settlement Agreement.** The Settlement indicates that The Plan will meet all current Zoning and applicable Site Plan Regs except for the 600 sq. ft. per occupant amendment. However, let me point out that Buildings D & E at the rear of the property are not permitted in the CB as noted in our Table of Uses. Parking on the first floor with residential above is not a permitted, or a conditional, use. Section 175-11 of the Zoning Ordinance states, "any use not specifically permitted or permitted by conditional use permit is prohibited."

Additionally, while the Settlement states that a majority of students will be housed on the north side, away from the neighborhoods, in this very first design, there does not appear to be an effort made to follow the Agreement. This Plan lacks effort to conform and imagination.

Despite the fact that protection of the College Brook is promised in the Settlement, I am not happy to see a road going through our shoreland/wetland buffer. Why is this road considered an improvement over the current paved parking lot next to the brook?

### **3. Lack of green space**

The existing green space next to The Works may not appear to be anything to boast about to the outsider, but it is well used and cherished by residents. It is protected from the road by the only mature trees on the lot. The proposal “park” appears to have more paved area than green and is sandwiched between the parking lot and Mill Road. Now even that is threatened by the possibility of needing to create a second outlet because there aren’t any other reasonable options for an outlet on this very constrained parcel if one is seemed necessary. The developer would gain much social capital if it took seriously the Mill Plaza Study’s desire for functional green space.

### **4. Building B is ill-placed**

This building obstructs the entrance into The Plaza. It seems not only inconvenient to force shoppers drive all the way into the middle of The Plaza before turning to go to the market, but also possibly a safety issue, should there be need for an emergency vehicle to get to the market. The location of Building B also promises to create a traffic nightmare—especially given the proposed allowance of parking for tenants.

Additionally, if Building B is to have student tenants, it is too close to the neighborhood.

### **5. Building C is too tall.**

I believe placing a 4-story building anywhere in sight of Mill Road defies the feeling of a small town Village Center.

### **6. The Plan promises to create a traffic nightmare.**

Adding 330 occupant vehicles traveling in and out several times a day, along with the very limited design for traffic flow (and parking) will make The Plaza very unattractive to Durham residents. As the Planning Board did with Madbury Commons and Orion, we should waive the requirement for tenant parking. I really don’t think we want to support bringing 330 additional cars of (student) tenants into our downtown and into The Plaza.

**7. The Plan tries to pack too much into the allotted space.** We have seen proposals that were approved in the past where the developer attempted to squeeze so much onto the parcel, that trash storage and pick up has become an issue. PLEASE let’s not overlook functional issues such as trash storage and pick-up, snow removal, traffic, limited parking, and pedestrian safety.

### **8. The Plan lacks imagination and has too many flaws to meet the**

**Conditional Use Criteria.** If The Plaza is going to continue to serve as a functional shopping center for townspeople, I urge the follow:

- *Do not waive any of the 320 spaces required for the 80,000 sq. feet of commercial space. Our Site Plan Regs clearly state that the PB can grant waivers only when a waiver serves the public interest. I would have a hard time imagining how the reduction of parking for shoppers will serve the public interest.*
- *Do waive 100% of the parking required for tenants as was done for Madbury Commons and Orion.*
- *Require the developer to meet our ZO and Site Plan Regulation. From my read of the ZO, this includes a complete redesign of buildings D & E. I believe that a stand-alone structured parking garage is the only structured parking permitted (though by Conditional Use) in the CB based on our Table of Uses.*
- *Consider moving the Market to the general location of Building C (perhaps pushed back some), thus creating ample new residential space above (no more than 2 or 3 floors total) and creating space for a large 2-3 story building where Building A currently exists.*
- *Either eliminate Building B or move it eastward to allow shoppers entrance to the parking at the front of the Plaza. If Building B remains, it should be designated for seniors.*
- *Figure out how to add more green space.*

**Rather than bully their way into town, I urge the developer to work with residents to come up with a design that will be a win-win for all.**

**Beth Olshansky**