

2/8/2016

Dear Planning Board,

Thank you for your careful review and deliberation of the proposed changes to the Mill Plaza. We realize that your job is time consuming and difficult, and that you have to weigh many factors in your decision making. We very much appreciate your service to the Town.

As you know, the Mill Plaza is not only central to Durham's commercial well-being but also serves as a community crossroads and meeting place. We are excited at the opportunity this redevelopment poses to improve the commercial center of Durham and look forward to patronizing the new businesses the project will attract as well as continuing to support the current businesses. As abutters we have particular interest in making sure that the redevelopment of the site is done with the community's and our neighborhood's needs in mind and see this project as an opportunity to address some of the shortcomings of the current Mill Plaza.

We support increasing the residential density in the town core as a way of protecting open space outside of the core. We believe it is wiser to have residential development in the town center than building on forests, farmlands and wetlands. We see the increased density as necessary in order to promote more sustainable lifestyles by increasing the number of residents without cars and generally reducing residents' reliance on automobiles. We hope these objectives can be achieved without compromising the existing quality of life enjoyed by those of us who already live in downtown neighborhoods.

We request that the Planning Board consider the following issues in your deliberations:

A. Protection of the buffer between the Faculty Neighborhood and the commercial area

1) Forest Path

One of the wonderful things about living in the Faculty neighborhood is having a lifestyle that is less dependent on cars and more conducive to walking. The Mill Plaza is a daily destination, and we are particularly fortunate to access the Plaza by way of a beautiful walking path from the Thompson Lane/Faculty Road intersection through the woods and across College Brook. People throughout the neighborhood use this path including many neighborhood children who walk to the middle and high schools. We have encountered residents from outside of our neighborhood who drive into town in order to walk their dogs in our neighborhood and along our forest path. Our young nieces and nephews beg to walk through “the secret path in the woods” when they come to visit. If you are not familiar with this area, we would urge you to walk along our path before making any decisions.

In order to protect both the path and the forested buffer between the neighborhood and the Mill Plaza, we purchased, at considerable personal expense, an acre of wooded land along this forested path. We saw this purchase as an important contribution to protecting one of the most important features that makes our neighborhood special. We

request that the Planning Board prioritize protecting this important buffer and pedestrian access from development, vehicles and misbehavior.

Developing vehicular access to the Mill Plaza through Chesley Drive would severely compromise our neighborhood forest path and pedestrian access. We understand that the current proposal does not request access to the Mill Plaza through Chesley Drive. The pressure to create a second vehicular access point to the Plaza by extending Chesley Drive will always loom as a potential threat to the neighborhood unless it becomes physically impossible to put the road through. We would be very happy to see a redevelopment plan that would eliminate a Chesley entrance from possible future consideration by obstructing potential vehicle access with a physical structure. Even providing access to emergency vehicles (as was mentioned at the Planning Board meeting) would turn what is now a pedestrian path linking Chesley Drive to the Mill Plaza into a road and severely impact the adjacent wetland as well as diminish the quality of the pedestrian access. As we understand the current plans, there does not seem to be any physical structure that would block future vehicular access to the site from Chesley Drive and hope that the final location of the buildings might finally put the question of the Chesley access road to rest.

2) Student Housing

We think the downtown location of the Mill Plaza would be particularly attractive to seniors as well as students and hope that there is consideration of potential rental markets beyond the student population. Designing at least one of the residential buildings (perhaps on the southern edge of the property) with the needs of seniors in mind seems desirable and would expand the market of potential tenants for the owners. It also would anticipate market trends in response to changing demographics as the population ages and the student population decreases.

Recognizing that the current plans are directed at student housing, the current configuration seems to put large numbers of students within close range of non-student housing in the neighborhood. We have seen the problems such situations create in other parts of town and hope that the Planning Board will be proactive in preventing similar conflicts on this site. It has been suggested that locating student housing on the north side of the site, toward Main Street, would reduce the impact of increased residential density on the Faculty Neighborhood, and we hope the Planning Board considers this and other ideas that may be offered to reduce potential conflicts particularly around noise issues.

B. Improvement of College Brook's water quality

Currently, the management of water runoff from the Mill Plaza into College Brook does not meet best management practices,

and we have seen plumes of gasoline in water running across the parking lot and into sewers that drain directly into College Brook without any filtering. College Brook is very “flashy” because of the large proportion of impervious surfaces in its watershed, including the Mill Plaza. Improving the quality of the water draining from the site (i.e., reducing nonpoint pollution sources) into College Brook and reducing runoff by increasing infiltration should be a priority of the redevelopment. Improved water management from this large site should contribute significantly to improving ecological conditions not only for College Brook but the Mill Pond, Oyster River and Great Bay as well.

C. Reduction of light pollution

The current Mill Plaza has poorly designed lighting that shines into nearby residences. Even though there is a significant forested buffer between our house and the Plaza, we are still affected by the bright lights shining directly into our bedrooms. We request that the redesigned Plaza eliminate this problem.

D. Parking and traffic congestion

We believe that severely limiting the number of parking spaces available to residents of the redeveloped Mill Plaza site will reduce the number of cars and potential traffic congestion issues the increased density could pose to the community.

E. Entrance

The entrance to the Mill Plaza, as currently designed, seems to be flawed. It is difficult to take a left turn out of the parking lot, and exiting vehicles have to pull into the crosswalk in order to see up Mill Road. Cars going north on Mill Road seem to drive too fast, and it is often awkward (and sometimes dangerous) for pedestrians to enter the Mill Plaza site as there are cars moving in and out from multiple directions. We hope that a clever re-design of the entrance would improve the flow of traffic and improve the safety of pedestrian access while making a traffic light unnecessary.

F. Aesthetics

The current Mill Plaza is ugly, and we hope the Planning Board will insist on architectural standards that will make the Plaza an attractive asset to the community for many decades to come. The “park” planned for the area between the Mill Plaza parking lot and Mill Road seems like it may end up as a trashy network of cow paths. While it would be nice to replace the current outdoor seating area adjacent to the Bagel Works that will be turned into a building under the current proposal, the strip along Mill Road hardly seems like a desirable place for people to gather. The current picnic area enjoys some protection from the road whereas the proposed green space is completely exposed to the street traffic. While we understand that the existing businesses have issues with locating a building along Mill Road, it seems that having a building along the road and finding a more protected place for a picnic/gathering area would enhance the experience of

Mill Plaza patrons while improving the streetscape of Mill Road. Could the visibility concerns of the current commercial tenants be addressed by effective and attractive signage? Also, where will the signage for the Mill Plaza be located if they put a building where the current sign is (as is currently planned)?

G. Trash

Litter from the Mill Plaza property blows into the southeast corner of the property and eventually into College Brook and onto our property. This corner is often trashy and unsightly (as is the entire buffer around the Mill Plaza), and we would urge the Mill Plaza management to be more diligent in picking up trash. There are no residences in our neighborhood that would ever allow the degree of trash build up that happens on this site, and we believe the Mill Plaza management should be equally diligent in picking up litter. The proposed increased density and activity on the site will likely exacerbate this situation, and we urge the Mill Plaza management to commit to keeping their property clean.

Thank you for considering our concerns as you review the project.

Sincerely,

Nancy Lambert and Marty Lee
17 Faculty Rd.