

February 8, 2016

Dear Michael and Members of the Durham Planning Board,

We have been residents of 14 Burnham Avenue for 12 years. We enjoy change—encourage it—but are attentive to thoughtful change that seriously considers the opinions of the community into which the change occurs. As residents of the Faculty Neighborhood, we have been adjacent to all of the exciting activities, and sometimes noise, of UNH. We worry, however, that the current Mill Road Plaza plan, which I observed when the Board meeting was televised on Feb. 3, seem to exacerbate the potential of the latter (noise), among other undesirable effects, rather than the former (excitement about possible new businesses and hopefully affordable housing).

The proposed placement of student housing on the south end of the property is in violation of the town's conditional use agreement; such housing must be built on the north end of the Plaza. As we experienced during the 2014 Cinco de Mayo celebration (and as occurs often during weekend college parties, beginning on Thursday evenings), many college students cannot control themselves, drunk or not. College-aged men students whistled and catcalled to my then-13-year-old daughter and her friends, some even younger than 13; others threw objects at the school buses, demanding that the UNH President and Oyster River School Board Superintendent work together to alleviate future potential "damage," including the inconvenience it causes to school bus drivers and their charges, for the 2015 celebration; what a waste of valuable administrators' time and energy. Furthermore, during the usual school week (not one dominated by a Cinco de Mayo-type event), my daughter already had expressed trepidation passing, on foot, one large fraternity on Main Street, in front of which young men (drinking alcohol or not) called out to her group of friends on a regular basis during the warmer spring and early summer months. I reported this to both to the UNH police and Durham police and was told that "nothing could be done" because the men were not committing any crime. If many (even a handful of) students behave as such without consequence to them, then the walk to high school and middle school amid new (most likely) student housing for many children using the path through the woods and the Plaza will be unpleasant indeed. What, too, of increased trash, pollution, traffic, sewage from new, multi-bed housing units, all infringing on the ecosystem of the adjacent woods and creek?

My 90-year-old mother, who relies on a walker for her limited mobility, often strolls to the Plaza when she visits (three to four times annually); if the parking lots become "encased" by buildings, demanding new traffic patterns to accommodate an increased flow of traffic (including the unfortunate possibility of opening up Chesley Drive to cars), she will be hard pressed to feel safe walking to the Plaza in her fragile condition, unable to hear well those cars coming from behind or to keep her balance if suddenly surprised by autos coming along too quickly. I know from my experience driving on campus and around downtown Durham that students on foot expect vehicles to stop for them, sometimes on a dime, while often they themselves are too rushed to stop for pedestrians. And despite recent laws against texting and driving, against using handheld phone devices while behind the wheel, many students and non-students alike still do so, rendering an increase in cars around Durham a hazard for pedestrians, young and old. While private business property owners can claim that these are not issues under their purview or control (agreed), they certainly cannot nor should not overlook the trajectory of actions implied here and would be expected to take it into consideration as they ponder or revise building plans.

The various rooflines of the proposed project create an aesthetic jumble: a one-story Hannaford's complex across from a two-story building, one that is to be perpendicular to a three- or four-story office

structure, all in front of four-story student housing with garage space. Where is the architectural harmony here? A space can and should be both functional and aesthetically pleasing.

Many new commercial and housing properties were built in Durham in 2015, but are yet to be occupied. With double or triple the number of available commercial or professional sites built into the new Mill Plaza proposal, and as-yet no waiting list of residents and businesses for the just-constructed sites downtown, what is the guarantee that they would fill? It would be unfortunate, and indeed visually unattractive, to build spaces that remain empty. This will send a clear message to potential future business people: Durham is not the place for your establishment. In fact, many Durham businesses find the town a hard place to set up shop. We have a high business rotation: Mamma Mac's closed a year ago; MixTeca closed recently; a store selling local goods and another selling men's ware were not profitable and closed.

Could some of this new housing be designated as low income to attract a range of residents for an appealing population variety: senior housing, for example? Foreign visitors/scholars? During the televised Board meeting, I heard the representative from the property owner adamantly express that anybody able to pay market price for a unit is welcome to rent it. The message about making money over all else is clear here. However, let me remind the owners that having capital to build—more capital than the average Durham resident—comes with expected ethical and leadership responsibilities: just because a firm is financially able to build and has the right to do so does not preclude a wider responsibility to the community into which it is building. What precedent would the owners of this firm like to set? If they offer some low-income senior housing, imagine how that might spur other wealthy property owners to behave as such. That is the kind of leadership the Durham community expects. In fact, a former plan for the Plaza was introduced a few years ago, one that was three years in the making by Durham residents and included the wishes of the community. Why was it rejected?

Here is what we appreciate about the current plan: restoring College Brook and providing a natural buffer between the property and the water; a consideration of green spaces.

Thank you for your attention to all such letters from Durham residents,

Monica Chiu & Brian Locke
14 Burnham Avenue