

February 8, 2016

Re: 2.10.16 Mill Plaza Public Hearing

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board,

Like you, I am here tonight because I care about the future of our town, and in particular, the future of the Mill Plaza site, and believe that it is our responsibility to help shape that future. There are many other Durham residents who also care deeply about this future who are not here tonight.

I know this because, in October of 2014, I came before the planning board with a letter signed by 154 Durham residents urging that Colonial Durham Associates be held accountable to the countless hours of design work and community conversations that led to the 2008 Mill Plaza Study. Over a year has passed since that meeting, our town has been taken to court over policies developed with our whole community in mind; and now we stand here essentially in the same place, again.

This time, I did not have a chance to organize my neighbors into a letter writing campaign or make telephone calls urging folks to attend tonight. Unlike Colonial Durham Associates and other developers who can afford to hire representatives to single-mindedly press their agenda, knowing that constant vigilance against them by ordinary citizens is impossible, the time I spend here and on this issue demands compromise from other aspects of my life and my family. But just because I don't have a fresh tally of signatures tonight, please recognize that I continue to speak on behalf of many other residents – those who signed the letter in 2014, and the numerous other families in our town who have immediate obligations to young children that make evening meetings difficult to attend, and the time and space to engage in such issues a luxury.

I entreat you to please keep our interests at heart, we year-round, tax-paying Durham residents with families and interest in a well-rounded community. I have no desire to shut down the redevelopment of the Mill Plaza - a sound, innovative, and inclusive redesign of the plaza would be enormously welcome in our town which, as noted earlier by many, is in need of a true "village center". In contrast, this design is not in the best interest of our residents; and I urge you to please fight for those of us who are counting on you to represent us.

Many of my concerns are the same as those stated in response to the original design in 2014. That letter, along with the signatures, is attached here again because many of its points, drawing on and building upon the work of the 2008 study, remain valid. Tonight, I will simply call your attention again to four main issues with the revised plan:

**1. Community space and green space** – If Mill Plaza is to function as a "village center", then there need to be spaces for people to gather, meet, and linger outside of the commercial spaces that will attract them. Such spaces require thoughtful connectivity, and they need to rise to the status of actively designed elements. As it stands, this plan proposes to remove the only green space that now exists in the plaza; and there don't appear to be any spaces that could fulfill this function in the current plan (landscaping within and bordering the parking lot does not count).

**2. Connectivity and safety** – Many people, including school children, pass through Mill Plaza on their way to Main Street or to the Middle or High Schools. Increased traffic and commercial activity within the plaza will complicate this commute and have the potential of discouraging such transit altogether. Rational, designated pedestrian-ways and bikeways that safely allow people to walk or bike through the development are critical to enhancing and maintaining safe connections for our kids and others who walk and bike downtown.

**3. Parking** – In the current plan, only 126 of the 360 spaces are dedicated to shoppers at the plaza, reducing the number of spaces we currently have by 2/3. Given that commercial space is supposed to increase dramatically with this new plan, this reduction in parking for town residents is untenable; it threatens the new businesses in the plaza and promises to make the prospect of venturing into downtown for business a frustrating and discouraging affair. While I applaud the developer's attempts to hide some of the parking in various ways so that the site is not just one sprawling parking lot (as it is now), the reduction in the number of spaces is unacceptable. Many of the new student housing developments downtown have little or no parking allotted for students. This is a strong encouragement to students to leave their cars in long-term UNH lots, accessible by public transit – Mill Plaza could follow this forward-thinking lead.

**4. Relative locations of commercial spaces and housing** - Although the settlement with the town stipulates that the plan must place as many beds as possible on the northern half of the property, over 200 of the 330 beds in the current design are in the southern part of the plaza, abutting the Faculty Neighborhood. I believe much more can and must be done to shift the balance of student housing to the Main Street and Mill Road borders of the property, leaving commercial and office space or parking closer to the Faculty Neighborhood, buffering and maintaining the quality of life of those residents as much as possible.

I thank you again for your time and consideration and I hope very much that these exact same issues will not need to be raised again at future meetings.

Sincerely,

Erin Hardie Hale  
74 Mill Road