

October 22, 2014

The Durham Planning Board  
15 Newmarket Road  
Durham, NH 03824

*re: Public Hearing - Mill Plaza Redevelopment. Design Review for partial redevelopment of Mill Plaza Shopping Center site including 44,110 square feet of new commercial space, with an addition to the existing Durham Marketplace building, two new mixed-use buildings, a separate bank with drive through, 120 residential apartments, and other site changes. Colonial Durham Associates, LP, c/o John Pinto, owner. Joseph Persechino, Tighe & Bond, Design Engineer. Adam Wagner, DeStefano Architects, Architect. Tax Map 5, Lot 1-1. Central Business Zoning District.*

Dear Members of the Planning Board:

It might surprise some of you to know that I am among those who believe that a redevelopment of the Mill Plaza could be a real benefit to the community. It won't be a surprise that I'm not going to pull any punches when I talk about the current proposal to redevelop it.

Today, the Plaza is an underdeveloped, poorly designed, un-attractive nuisance that has brought us desirable services at the cost of continual environmental degradation from poor snow removal practices, visual blight, loss to the quality of life for its immediate residential neighbors, and less property tax revenue than had it been redeveloped decades ago—all in the heart of our downtown. That it has remained so is testament to the neglect by its owner, who now comes before us with a suggestion to give it a facelift but not to address the underlying unhealthy conditions.

The Plaza could be so much better. But the proposal before the Board does not lead me to believe that is in the cards anytime soon, because the proposal before you is a nonstarter.

This is not the first proposal brought to us by developers who have not done their homework before requesting a preliminary application review. Nor is it the first that asks us to negotiate to the point where the developers should have started their conversation in the first place. In other words, they bring us Plan A, when we know that in the end they will accept Plan E, although we believe that Plan F is really the best for the community and still economically viable for the property owner and developer.

I don't believe that the applicant has started off on the right foot.

Over the decades, Durham residents have collectively put in many thousands of hours of volunteer time and, at times, professional expertise, to shape a community that is attractive to current residents and, by extension, to potential new homeowners, businesses, developers, and, more recently, to real estate investment trusts and other out-of-town investors. Those volunteer hours add up. I'd like to share a few numbers.

- **Town Council**—Nine of us each year spend approximately 100 hours at Council meetings. Each Councilor also spends at least 12 hours in his or her Committee/Board meeting. Many also attend other meetings, such as this one. And those are just the meetings. We also spend hours preparing for these public meetings, discussing issues with another Councilor or two or with Town Staff, reviewing reports and budgets, and compiling research to support initiatives that we will put forward.
- **Other boards and committees**—Durham has a lot—some say too many—of other boards and committees, all comprised of volunteers, who number somewhere between 80 and 100. These folks also attend monthly meetings. Some also contribute their time on projects of varying duration.
- **Mill Plaza Study Committee**—Eleven members of the main committee were aided by residents and consultants who provided expertise over a period of a year and a half from 2007 to 2008. Other residents also attended and commented throughout this time, and many weighed in when the Report was presented at a forum.
- Over 50 residents and numerous Town staff participated in the **B. Dennis Town Design charrette** in November 2009, covering 4 days and resulting in the Durham Commercial Core Strategic Plan.
- The **Master Plan Forum and Visioning Survey** conducted in early 2011 engaged hundreds of residents in planning and participating.
- **Public hearings for the Orion and Madbury Commons** student housing were heavily attended. Community members who weighed in are to a great extent responsible for what we will actually see built instead of what was initially proposed.
- **Other public hearings—among them for zoning amendments, planning applications, proposals in our Historic District or for conserving land**—all engage residents, who give up time to try to improve the place in which they have chosen to live. We are literally tired of these constant struggles. Sometimes we give up our active participation to simply sign a petitions, thankful that one of us has expressed what many of us believe.

Here's one example. A public hearing was held by the Planning Board at its October 14, 2009 meeting, concerning a proposal to increase the number of

parking spaces at the Mill Plaza. During the hearing, a resident presented a petition with 120 signatures. Minutes reflect that “The petition requested that the Planning Board reject the application to expand parking at the rear of Mill Plaza. It said scores of Town residents and outside efforts had worked together over the last decade to create a vision for the downtown core, and said these efforts, including the 2000 Master Plan update and the 2008 Mill Plaza Study Committee Report had laid out some clear goals...[and that] the current application ran directly counter to these community recommendations.

So you see, it’s not just that this proposal turns its back on the recommendations of the Mill Plaza Study Committee Report. It’s that the applicant hasn’t bothered to become sufficiently educated about us and our values—or doesn’t care. Our meeting proceedings, documents, opinions, conclusions, and recommendations are all available to anyone who cares to review them.

Many of us were drawn to Durham by its unique sense of place. We value that uniqueness. The proposal before you could be plopped down in Anywhere U.S.A. It ignores the topography, Main Street, the College Brook, the adjoining Historic District, Faculty Neighborhood, and even UNH.

One of my expectations is that developers show respect for my community’s values. I ask the Board to request that Colonial Durham Associates go back to the drawing board and not return until they can return with something that manifests that respect. I hope the applicant will consider and incorporate features that address the following:

- Design attractive and safe pedestrian and bicyclist accessways through the site—One-third of Durham’s single family homes lie in the downtown neighborhoods. Nearly 16,000 students attend UNH and approximately 4,000 people work at the university.
- Leverage the College Brook—Build townhouses and a river walk along it to provide attractive housing that simultaneously buffers noise and visual impacts to the Faculty Neighborhood. Do more than the minimum cosmetic improvement. Read Appendix E, the “College Brook Report,” of the Mill Plaza Study Committee Report.
- Create streetscapes that coordinate with downtown to benefit both business owners and the community—Studies show that customers will spend more in locations that provide visual and functional amenities such as public spaces, landscaping, and pedestrian and bicyclist facilities.
- Meet real needs of the community and create a win-win economic outcome—Take advantage of the gap between demand and supply of elderly housing and of Durham’s density bonuses. As the Board heard from Strafford Regional Planning Commission, and as many recent studies, both specific to New Hampshire and nationwide, point out, opportunities abound. (Times have changed since the 2007 RKG Economic Report was added to the Mill Plaza Study Committee’s Report.)

*To Durham Planning Board from Robin Mower  
October 22, 2014  
page 4 of 4 – Mill Plaza Redevelopment – Design Review*

We live here. At the end of the day, the applicant goes home. There's a world of difference in our respective rights to enjoy the properties in which we have each invested. I ask the Board to keep us in mind as it considers what the applicant is requesting.

Sincerely yours,

*[signed original document in Planning Department]*

Robin Mower