

October 10, 2018

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board,

As I have already submitted many suggested revisions for the Draft Solar Ordinance, I will use this opportunity to share some thoughts moving forward.

First, as PB discussions proceed, I hope we can resist the urge to polarize our community into “pro” and “anti” factions. As I watched the Sept. 26 solar discussion, I noticed that some members of the Planning Board used terms like “pro-solar people” or “solar supporters.” I want to make it clear that even those who have come forward with specific recommendations regarding aesthetics are “pro-solar.” Please do not try to pigeonhole us in a way that is not only inaccurate, but also serves to polarize the community. While the solar discussion is difficult and nuanced, let’s not fall into the unproductive polarizing behaviors we see in Washington DC. WE ARE ALL PRO-SOLAR, even those who care about aesthetics as well.

Charlie Forcey, former Chair of the Durham Energy Committee and well-respected member of the community, was wise to propose a Purpose Statement in the proposed solar ordinance that sought to find BALANCE. After the installation on Packers Falls Road, he realized that an ordinance without restrictions would sour the enthusiasm of many Durham residents for solar and had the potential to turn some Durham residents against solar. I hope the members of this Board will recognize and honor Charlie’s wisdom to find a moderate and balanced approach.

The Planning Board has the difficult task of finding a nuanced position that will reflect the values of the *entire community*. Durham has decades of history documenting its commitment to both its natural and scenic resources. Longtime resident Dudley Dudley recalls that this value system existed as long as she can remember, some 80 years ago.

More recently, we find evidence in the **2000 Master Plan** under **SCENIC VIEWS**:

“The landscape of an area defines its cultural, natural, and historical heritage and thus provides the members of a community with a sense of identity. Durham’s identity is marked by the views of and from roadways, the major rivers, and the Great and Little Bays. In addition, the areas of historical and existing agricultural operations create a pastoral landscape that helps to define the community.”

Under **Important aspects of views**, listed are the following items which all affirm Durham’s longstanding commitment to preserve our viewsheds:

- Continuous views that “follow” you as you travel along the road or are deep views.
- Lack of scattered development or other disturbances in views.
- Durham has four locally designated scenic roads – Bennett Road, Packers Falls Road, Durham Point Road, and Bay Road – and a Federally designated scenic river – the Lamprey River.

I recall a few years ago, during discussions about replacing the Packers Falls Road Bridge, John Kraus, then a Town Councilor, observed, “In Durham, our bridges are our cathedrals.” He was referring to our longstanding commitment and passion for preserving our scenic vistas. To many, Durham’s natural beauty serves as food for the soul. Why can we not create a solar ordinance that encourages solar while still honoring what has been and remains dear to so many residents here in Durham?

While some might say, “that was then, this is now,” I would like to refer you to statements in the **Future Land Use Master Plan Chapter** approved by the Planning Board just last **January 2018**:

**“Balance:** The master plan vision stresses the importance of a balanced approach when integrating community priorities.”

**“Quality of Place:** The Durham community deeply values aesthetic and the character of the landscape. The community treasures the town’s history, rural setting, and cultural, educational, and agricultural resources.”

“When asked what they love most about Durham and what they hope for its future, participants spoke overwhelmingly about the town’s character and appearance.”

“Natural features and resources should be preserved and a lower population density maintained in outlying areas with development subtly integrated into the environment. In residential areas, thoughtful zoning contributes to maintaining the character of a neighborhood.”

**“Rural resources:** Durham is a community with abundant natural resources. Scenic views of Little Bay, the Oyster and Lamprey rivers, and numerous farms, forests, wetlands, and conserved properties contribute to Durham’s special identity.”

The Future Land Use Chapter even recommends that we create a Gateway Overlay District.

**“Balance Recommendations: Gateway Design Overlay District:** The community places high value on Durham’s natural beauty, and residents consider the views along major transportation corridors to be important gateways. Implementing a design overlay district along these corridors could balance the rights of property owners to develop their land while ensuring that any development will be of high-quality design.”

In the **Meeting Summary of Land Use Forum May 2017** under **What we love about this community**, it states:

**We deeply value the natural environment and beauty of this place.**

Under **Ten years from now we hope....** We will have preserved: “Our natural resources and open spaces and given them priority when making planning decisions.”

Under **What we are doing well?**

“Participants recognize and are pleased that Durham has preserved a significant amount of land and protected the area’s natural beauty.”

*Let’s not turn our backs on Durham’s longstanding commitment to preserve our scenic viewsheds.*

The most recent report on climate change acknowledges that if we are to realize critical goals, it will take a huge national and international commitment from policy-makers, from industry, and from innovators. Whether Durham allows solar trackers in one’s front yard or backyards is not going to be a global game changer since most solar systems in Durham are likely to be roof-mounted (especially given new roof-mounted technologies such as that install at the Great Bay Discovery Center. Yet those decisions will significantly impact our community. For this reason, I do hope the PB will carefully consider recommendations that will serve to preserve those most vulnerable scenic places.

I would also like to remind the PB that our ordinance should set out a clear vision and regulations that are aligned with the Purpose Statement. Those residents who are not able to meet those regulations can always seek relief at the ZBA, which regularly grants relief to those who have no other options. If we are serious about preserving our town’s character and scenic places, we would be wise to set out clear guidelines that can be waived under certain circumstances.

Finally, perhaps I mistakenly heard at the last PB meeting that Mary Downes was asked to review an earlier draft of the ordinance to offer her opinion on what should stay and what should go, a draft that did not include residents’ most recent recommendations. I hope that does not mean residents’ comments will not be considered. Myself and several others spent many hours going through the draft ordinance, thinking about implications while driving around town, and then trying to offer some constructive feedback. If all those comments are going to be ignored, without even discussion, it begs the question of why the public should bother participating in the public hearing process at all. If the PB did not want to receive further recommendations, the public hearing should have been closed a month ago, prior to residents laboring over the most recent draft to offer recommendations.

I urge the Planning Board to follow the path originally described to the public in which residents’ specific comments and recommendations would be integrated into a draft document and then would be discussed, comment by comment by members of the Planning Board. I know it is an arduous process and I thank you in advance for your endless hours of service.

Sincerely,

Beth Olshansky

122 Packers Falls Road

I respectfully ask that the Planning Board not discard decades and decades of values to protect Durham's natural beauty to make Durham what it is today.

ZBA