

# Benjamin Domaingue

39 Emerson Road / Durham, NH 03824 / January 4, 2022

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board,

I am a Dec. 2021 UNH graduate, originally from Westford, MA, who majored in Journalism and Political Science. I have been an editor and writer for *The New Hampshire*, and my articles have also appeared in the *Concord Monitor* and other publications. You may recall my participation in the August 25, 2021 public hearing on the Mill Plaza redevelopment application.

I write now, not only with a brief summary of my opposition to the proposed Mill Plaza site plan, but also with my discouragement regarding what I witnessed of the Planning Board review process.

As I said on August 25, I ordered one of the “better-plaza-plan-needed” lawn signs in solidarity with other members of our community, who are overwhelmingly opposed to transforming the central property in Durham into what would effectively be a student-housing complex. I also signed the petition, where over 1000 residents highlighted a few of the ways in which the plaza plan violates Durham’s zoning.

The written comment I added to the petition conveyed this brief message: **“Speaking as a UNH student, we don’t need more student housing. We don’t want to destroy this beautiful town we have grown to call home.”**

My point was/is that everyone living in Durham – UNH students and long-term residents alike – deserves a vibrant multi-age, community-enriching downtown shopping plaza. Durham has a very small downtown, and in order to draw prospective students to UNH, keep them, and expand healthy (non-drinking) activity options for students, we need something better than turning the plaza into a functional extension of UNH dorms. I have read and listened to many Durham residents’ comments, and I agree that the current plan does little for anyone except the out-of-state owners of the plaza.

The most glaring fact to me regarding this proposed student housing is that Durham has *plenty* of housing available for students, particularly with enrollments trending downward. As reported in NH newspapers in the last few months, the Chair of USNH Board of Trustees, Joe Morone, anticipates the number of UNH students to “drop off a cliff” in just a few years. The plan for the plaza is already out of date in terms of UNH and Durham needs. And while Durham has what will soon be a vast over-abundance of student housing, Durham has very few shared multi-age community spaces for shopping, eating, gathering, which is something that the Plaza should and could be.

I understand that legally, the property owners could not deny housing to non-students based on age, but you have to understand that the proposed floor plans, which contain four bedroom/four bathrooms in each unit, are very unlikely to attract families and working adults. What apartment complexes - besides those designed with university students in mind, award each tenant their own bathroom? Though legally a separate complex from student housing, it would effectively serve as an extension of university housing because the location of the proposed plan and our demographics demand it.

Instead of something positive, the plan before you – as you’ve heard from so many others – is for massively oversized and too-tall buildings that violate wetland zoning, remove a forested hillside, and obviously add a lot of noise and late-night student activity. But what disturbed me even more on August 25 than the Board’s enthusiastic treatment of a terrible site plan was the rude mistreatment of the public input. Residents and community members were called ignorant, foolish, even deceitful. They were called anti-student bigots – something particularly upsetting (and nonsensical) to me, as a now former student!

Perhaps I’m ignorant regarding much of Durham’s political culture, but I found that meeting to be an abhorrent attack by some board members on the citizenry of Durham, simply because we were asking for a better, zoning-compliant plan. The plan as it stands now is anti-student and should be rejected.

**I urge the board to respect the town’s Zoning and its community, deny the Mill Plaza plan, and hold out for a better, more community-centric proposal.**