

February 9, 2022

Re: Mill Plaza Redevelopment Plan

Dear Exhausted Members of the Durham Planning Board,

What does one say to a tired and overwhelmed Planning Board, 7½ years after CDA promised they would work with the community to design and build an extension of our downtown, something they called a “Durham Village Center”? Well, it hasn’t turned out the way we had all hoped. I regret this was such a dragged-out process.

At the January 2020 TRG meeting, with respect to the first iteration of the latest CDA plan (#9), Rick Taintor acknowledged: **“I would take exception to when you say...this is an extension of the downtown. I don’t think it is at all. It’s two buildings in a parking lot.... It’s a marginal improvement from a 1960s shopping center, a strip mall kind of thing, just taller buildings.”**

Rick Taintor has also noted the loss of the prior plan’s “streetscape,” which he had thought made the Settlement-required ground-floor connector through Building B unnecessary.

What we have ended up with is no change to our beleaguered grocery store (once a hub for year-round residents to gather), which is to remain a one-story building next to two massive buildings (4-stories and 3-stories). These out-of-scale buildings will look absolutely ridiculous next to one-story Building A and out-of-place with modest homes along Faculty Road and Chesley Drive. There is no question that these buildings are out of character with the adjacent family neighborhood and there is no way to provide a visual buffer to screen such enormous buildings.

Proposed Buildings B & C would house 258 (student) beds (acknowledged recently by the Chair to house primarily students, as if that was ever in question), and for which we all know – the whole town knows – will wreak havoc on the Faculty Neighborhood.

Don’t you have enough video and audio evidence and testimony from downtown residents – backed up by expert input – to prove this point and turn this project down? It will be an absolute shame if this ill-conceived project is approved, leading to significant deterioration of a much-loved family neighborhood.

I do not buy the argument that the PB must consider and vote on the USE and that the USE is merely generic “RESIDENTIAL.” In Durham, a college town, we have decades of precedent and existing evidence that **Mixed Use with Residential equals “student housing.”** This was as outlined in great detail in Robin Mower’s letter of 1/6/22.

We all know this USE will create noise during all hours of the night, trash on the site and its surrounds, glare, litter, and disruptive noise and worse in the adjacent neighborhood. One might argue that some of this already occurs. The point is that locating 258 more young people, who like to drink and party, so close to a residential family neighborhood is *poor planning*, guaranteed to make things much worse. This reality has been well documented.

The location of this student housing, in close proximity to the neighborhood, will draw more students into and through the neighborhood to roam and party. There will be more loud students partying in the Faculty Neighborhood and more loud noise on their return back to their Plaza home during wee hours of the night. Former Council Chair Jay Gooze testified to you about this on December 8, 2021, adding his letter on February 8 to the mounds of Citizen Comments.

This project is a clear INTENSIFICATION OF USE. In your heart of hearts, how can you justify approving this project with its hugely negative impact on the lives of so many Durham residents? This is the very reason the Town made Mixed Use Residential Conditional Use, as I documented in my August 31, 2021 letter.

Please use the Zoning tools afforded to you by CU guided by the Master Plan (as referenced in the Conditional Use chapter) to turn down this horrific project.

We have heard CDA's Ari Pollack state repeatedly that this particular proposal is a chance of a lifetime. Yes, a chance of a lifetime to destroy an urban forest, lose any chance of a fully restored wetland buffer, and damage Durham's largest in-town family neighborhood – all while adding little to our downtown beyond unsightly buildings, a meagre amount of new commercial space, more intense pedestrian traffic, and yes, disruptive noise at all hours of the night.

On 1/24/22, Dennis Meadows wrote in a letter to the Conservation Commission. He asked, **“Will the Plaza project be required to comply with Durham’s zoning or will Durham’s zoning be twisted to comply with the Plaza project?”** I ask this same question of the Planning Board. For the sake of our entire community, please do not twist our Zoning Regulations in order to approve this project. We all know IT IS WRONG FOR DURHAM.

I beg you to do the right thing and turn down this horrific project. You can be assured, eventually a better plan will come before you. Developers abhor a vacuum.

Beth Olshansky
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