

July 16, 2020

Re: Mill Plaza Redevelopment Project, Architectural Regulations

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board,

I find it curious that only now, after CDA has presented details on landscaping plans and negotiated over the precise number of parking spaces, that we are finally looking at major determining factors for the site such as the Site Plan and the Elevations. Shouldn't major items central to the project such as the siting, size, scale, massing of buildings have been taken up much earlier before locking in the number of trees or parking spaces? This was a curious and interesting decision on the part of CDA.

As we review the Site Plan and Elevations, I look to our Architectural Design Regulations which are tucked away in the Site Plan Regulations. These are Standards which "shall" be adhered to. A great deal of thought and care has gone into the development of these regulations to insure quality redevelopment of our downtown. It is up to the PB to ensure these regulations are followed. I would hope that the CDA architect will go through our regulations and explain to the PB and the public the ways in which the regulation are and are not being met.

While I have many concerns about whether the plan actually conforms to our Architectural Standards design-wise, I would like to point out one specific way in which the Plan clearly *does not meet the following regulation*:

**L. 6) Variation in heights.** Some variation in building height within a block is desirable to help break up the mass of the block and to create variety and interest; generally, however, **there shall not be more than a one- or 1-1/2 story difference in height between adjacent buildings in order to maintain continuity along the streetscape. This limitation does not apply when the adjacent building is one story.** (emphasis added).

While one might read this and say, "Aha, since Hannaford is one story, this regulation does not apply." However, since the Hannaford building will be built up to 1.5 stories by adding a false ½ story, per our regulation this means that the maximum building height of the adjacent building, Building B, shall be no more than 3 stories (a maximum of a 1-1/2 story difference). This is one concrete and critical way that the CDA Plan clearly does not meet our regulations. I find a 2 ½ height difference unacceptable and clearly not in the spirit or intent of the ordinance which was to create a continuity of streetscape. Thus, according to our regulations, a waiver shall not be granted.

Why is this important? We have a chance to redevelop one of the largest downtown properties. We should do it in a way that honors the vision put forth by the town and adheres to our town regulations. Without the sense of continuity required among adjacent buildings, we are left with a low-lying sprawling grocery building adjacent to two oversized, out-of-scale, blockish,

dormitory buildings with little sense of connection or continuity between them. This Plan does not meet our regulations.

What can be done about this? This Plan should not be approved as is. The height of Building B should be reduced by a minimum of one story to the allowable maximum height of 3 stories per our ordinance. The building footprints should be reduced in size enough to offer improved landscaping and some outdoor seating as originally proposed. Additionally, the blockish massing of the two large buildings should be broken up by the architectural elements described in our regulations. I also would encourage adding aesthetic elements to the buildings such as the black or dark brown window casings used in Madbury Commons that can make an ordinary building look more handsome.

This project is out of human scale and lacks architectural detailing that would produce a handsome development. As a former (and current) PB member once asked of another developer years ago, let's ask CDA to go back to the drawing board and "dazzle us." Our community deserves the extra effort.

Beth Olshansky

122 Packers Falls Road