

February 3, 2022

Dear Chairman Rasmussen and Members of the Planning Board:

As the opportunity for the public to comment on the proposed development plan for the Mill Plaza draws to a close, I write about communication. I feel some regret that I did not do so earlier. It is, perhaps, too late to alter the tone of the conversations about CDA's proposal for the Mill Plaza, but perhaps these thoughts, if taken to heart, might make future conversations between the Planning Board and the public less frustrating.

Chairman Rasmussen, you, and perhaps others publicly and privately, have remarked that comments by citizens have been redundant (and worse, that the people who have offered them don't know what they are talking about), and that they often speak to a broader perspective than the specifics of the criteria on which the Planning Board needs to focus in making its decision to approve or reject CDA's proposal.

You, other Planning Board members, the applicants, and the public have been often observably frustrated as we all sit through endless meetings discussing this proposal. Sometimes your frustration has resulted in dismissive, critical comments directed at citizens individually and as a group. Such comments are detrimental to constructive process and contribute to creating what has often felt like an adversarial relationship between the public and the Planning Board.

We should not be adversaries. Planning Board members volunteer copious amounts of time and energy. You are to be commended for your service to our town. Presumably you serve because you care about our town and want it to be the best it can be. Presumably you see your job as a Planning Board member as being a steward of our town's Master Plan, agreements, and ordinances. Presumably you exercise your best attention, delve deeply into matters to educate yourself on matters that you may not readily understand, draw on whatever relevant professional expertise you may have, listen to your fellow members -- and to the public, and only then render judgements on the proposals before you.

We, the citizens of Durham, who come to meetings, and address you orally and in writing, also want what we think is best for our town and our neighborhoods. Why does it so often feel like we are at odds with one another?

I am a licensed, masters-level social worker who has studied effective communication and counseled couples, families, and larger systems. One of the most basic principles of effective communication is reflective listening. It involves attending without distraction to the person who is speaking to you, truly listening to what they are saying, and then reflecting to them by paraphrasing their words or otherwise communicating what you have heard to ensure that you have heard them correctly. Like all communication, it encompasses verbal and non-verbal language.

I can't help but think that if you and other members of the Planning Board had directly acknowledged the concerns and points that so many citizens have raised, indicating that you

heard them, asking questions if needed to clarify, and stating clearly that you would consider them in your discussions whether during that same meeting or through a careful review of the minutes and written submissions as you make your final deliberations and decision, that citizens would have felt heard (and not felt the need to repeat ourselves ad nauseum). Too often that has not been the response we have received, and we have been left feeling unable to trust that you are truly listening or taking our concerns seriously.

Too many members of the public wonder if the decision has essentially already been made to approve CDA's proposal regardless of the many ways in which it lacks compliance with our Conditional Use Criteria. That feeling comes in no small part from the way the Planning Board has conducted itself (and allowed CDA to control the agenda and discussions). I have spoken with multiple people over the months – people who wonder whether one or more people on the Planning Board or elsewhere in the Town government are being paid off, whether backroom deals have been made promising CDA that their proposal will be approved, that the Town is afraid of being sued. While I doubt these things are true, those sentiments clearly exist – and that should trouble you. Many residents simply don't understand how and why the presentation of this dreadful proposal has gone on so long when clearly it does not meet our Zoning Ordinance and offers very little benefit for the community.

Who does benefit from this proposal? Clearly CDA has put forth a plan that they believe will bring them financial profits. Will Durham benefit from having massive student housing buildings in what we hoped would be an appealing, citizen-friendly town center? Will the residents of the adjacent neighborhoods benefit from this project? Will our town be more appealing to visitors and prospective new residents?

You don't need to answer these questions directly; perhaps you and others have different answers to them. What you do need to do is properly evaluate the proposal in terms of whether it meets the Conditional Use Criteria and the Master Plan, standards that were created to ensure that future development in our town would be beneficial and in accordance with how we want our town to be. You need to evaluate the proposal critically, using the full array of means (including properly conducted studies by certified experts, preferably independent ones rather than those presented by the applicant to shore up its own desires). And you need to listen to and seriously consider public input. Please respond to us in ways that assure us that you have, are, and will continue to do all of the above.

With gratitude for your service and acknowledgment of the hard work that remains before you,

Deborah Hirsch Mayer

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