

November 23, 2020

Dear Members of the Conservation Commission:

I and other Durham residents have repeatedly expressed our concern and dismay regarding multiple aspects of Colonial Durham's current proposal for redeveloping the Mill Plaza. Now it is your turn to consider and weigh in on Colonial Durham's plan in regard to whether CDA should be allowed to violate conditional use zoning and proceed with their project regardless of the deleterious effects it will have on the fragile eco-systems of the wetlands, brook, and urban forest that are part of the perimeter of the Plaza.

I served on the Mill Plaza Study Commission, working over an 18-month period with my fellow commission members, numerous citizens, and an architectural team to develop what became an award-winning proposal for the redevelopment of the Plaza. Our proposal was in response to a request from the developer and his team (Colonial Durham Associates/CDA) to work in partnership with the town to devise a plan to redevelop the Plaza. It was a beautiful plan with provisions for creating a center for our community that honored the natural environment and eco-systems surrounding the Plaza and incorporated green space and plantings to enhance areas in which community members would gather to converse, eat, and shop. We were so excited at the possibilities inherent in our plan! Then CDA walked away from the project they had called us into.

A decade and more has passed since our work. How frustrating and sad that CDA paid no attention to what the citizens proposed! How frustrating and sad that the Plaza far from improving over this time has deteriorated further as CDA has ignored their own proposals for tree planting and care, and without permission from the Town or required state permits, degraded the natural borders of the site by illegally bulldozing the rear hillside, in turn causing flooding, pollution, and damage to the College Brook and College Brook Greenway ecosystems. Joshua Meyrowitz's Powerpoint of 11-19-20 details the history of disregard and flagrant violations by Colonial Durham. Please read it and digest what he presents there.

Now Colonial Durham seeks permission to further violate the bordering edges of the Plaza property. If we must accept a plan for housing in the Plaza – not what the majority of citizens would like to see – can we at least have a plan with buildings constructed on a scale appropriate to the site, a plan that preserves the wetlands and hillside and the ecosystems they contain – including the birds, animal life, plants, and water that provide us with precious, beautiful spaces to enjoy while providing us with some minimal buffers from the noise, lights, and other byproducts of commercial and probably residential life in the Plaza?

I have read John Hart's detailed letter to you and Carol Birch's brief impassioned one. If given the chance, I would add my signature to both. In the larger, longer collection of citizen comments spanning the history of this project, you will find similar input from hundreds of residents. And there are others who don't write but have spoken at and come to meetings for years.

I urge you to listen to the many concerns being raised and to act to protect and conserve our brook, our hillside forest, our wildlife, our buffers, and the delight we take in being in nature as we walk near and through our plaza en route to shopping, banking, socializing or simply being out in our beloved home town.

With deep appreciation for your service on the Conservation Commission and gratitude for your expertise, and the time and effort you spend on behalf of keeping our town special,

*Deborah Hirsch Mayer*  
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