

To: Michael Behrendt and the Durham Planning Board Members
From: Dennis Meadows
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The Church Hill Parking lot proposal requires us to decide whether its benefits for parking and traffic in Durham will outweigh its numerous and substantial environmental costs. I participated in the November 25 site walk in order to form my own opinion about the tradeoff. I found it impossible to decide, in part, because of the many contradictions among its proponents.

One contradiction lies in the claim that the project will improve parking in Durham. According to the minutes of the site walk the parking lot designer said, "There will be a total of 190-220 parking spaces." I counted the spaces on his preferred plan. There are at most 194 spaces. But building that option will destroy the 40 spaces that exist today. So the net gain is about 150, and of those, according to Peter Murphy, "Most will likely be for students."

If the parking lot is built, that could eliminate a major obstacle to the construction of Colonial Durham Associates' proposal. If the Mill Plaza is reconstructed, that would eliminate another 70 of the existing parking spaces in town while adding 330 beds and 60,000 sq. ft. of commercial space. Will this project alleviate Durham's parking problems? I doubt it.

In fact, Durham does not have too few parking spaces. It has too many parking spaces tied up in long-term student leases. The UNH web site lists over 260 spaces available to off campus (private) parking in Durham's core. It would cost less to solve any parking problem for Durham simply to lease 150 of those spaces and turn them over for free use by the public.

But that would still not eliminate the contradictions. The Strafford Rivers Planning Commission reports that about 6000 cars a day passed the proposed parking lot entrance on Main Street in 2015. I am sure the number would be much greater today, because the town has grown and the capacity of Route 108 down to Newmarket has been substantially increased.

I recently stood near the Red Tower and watched traffic back up on Main Street behind the stop sign near the post office and the stop light at the

Route 108 intersection. When the traffic is stop and go, it is often impossible to leave the parking lot. The developer says increased traffic flow onto Main Street will not be a problem, since the parking spaces will be occupied mainly by students who do not move their cars frequently. But this is contradicted by some advocates who claim that the parking lot is desirable, because it will give more parking to customers of the downtown businesses.

Proponents say that we could address this contradiction by building a deck on the parking lot - thus giving spaces both to students and to business-related needs. However, each parking space on such a structure will cost \$20,000 - \$50,000. Peter Murphy has rightly said this investment would have no economic justification, but he would be willing to consider a deck built in partnership with the town.

“Partnership” is a code word that means the town would pay. If you use the lowest figure to estimate the cost, 100 spaces on the deck will cost \$2 million. I do not believe the Durham public will approve a \$2 million dollar bond issue to build a deck with 100 parking spaces, while 260 parking spaces have been removed from public use in town and leased out to students to give their owners a rental income for each space of up to \$1450/year. Will this project alleviate Durham’s traffic problems? I doubt it.

I believe everyone promoting the parking lot is sincere and honest in their beliefs that it will be a useful project. I personally respect Peter Murphy and Mike Sievert. I know they are both competent professionals. But they are looking at individual parts of the project - naturally the ones that will profit them - and they are ignoring the larger costs to Durham.

The Church Hill parking lot proposal reminds me of the story about the blind men and the elephant. People may be permitted to look at parts, but we need for our Planning Board to look at the whole. When I look at the whole I conclude that the proposal to build a parking lot behind the Red Tower fails every one of the criteria our zoning code specifies for approving conditional use, except, perhaps, number 8. For that criterion there is not yet enough fiscal information to decide.

Before using more valuable time from Planning Board members and the interested public, it is essential to resolved these contradictions. The environmental costs of the project need clarification. I leave that to others.

Before assessing the benefits, there are at least five questions that need to be answered:

1. Of the 150 spaces that will be created how many will be for students, for Colonial Plaza residents, for Red Tower residents, for customers of Durham's downtown businesses?
2. What would be the cost of a parking deck, and who will pay for it?
3. What is the current hourly traffic count on Main Street at the proposed entrance to the parking lot?
4. When Durham's traffic model is used to simulate the impact of the parking lot, what does it tell us about its impact on the town's traffic flows?
5. The ratio of parking spaces to cars can be raised by increasing the number of spaces or by reducing the number of cars. Typically the latter approach is faster, cheaper, and much more environmentally benign. What would be the nature and the costs of measures that could be used to reduce the number of cars requiring parking spaces in our town's core?

I am not against change. I have lived in Durham for 30 years. The town has changed enormously over that period, and I consider it to be a better place for living now. But the choice for or against each proposal for a major change should be based on a reasoned comparison of its costs and benefits. Contradictions in the descriptions of this parking project leave me unable to to make that comparison.

Sincerely,

Dennis Meadows