

6 January 2020

To: Durham Planning Board  
From: Joshua Meyrowitz, 7 Chesley Drive, Durham  
Re: Church Hill Woods to Asphalt Citadel Application

I thank the Planning Board for all your efforts to make Durham a better place in which to live. I am writing to support the comments and letters that have detailed the significance of the urban trees and greenways in our downtown core. Durham, as you know, has long been designated as a “Tree City, USA,” and I hope that proposals that undermine that distinction will be rejected by the Board. That includes the current “Conditional Use” proposal to transform a 1.3-acre sloping wooded lot on Church Hill into a 194-space parking lot by building a football-field size mound on the property next to residential homes and looming above heavily used public pathways in the Faculty Neighborhood.

I live directly across from the Church Hill woods. And the lowest point of the Church Hill parcels (the old stone wall) is already about 20 feet higher than street-level at Chesley Drive. I look up to the woods from my second-floor bedroom window. Thus, the planned massive mound and retaining wall (12-, 14-, 16-feet tall?) that would start even higher up on the lot, and with added height of cars, drivers, snow plows, and lamp posts would tower like a fortress over adjacent homes and the popular neighborhood wooded paths. Such a structure would violate almost every Conditional Use criterion by adding more adverse impacts on adjacent properties than any other existing or permitted uses in the zone (traffic, noise, odors, vibrations, dust, fumes, hours of operation, light/glare, etc.) – particularly, *out-of-proportion scale*. As the Ordinance states: **“the location, nature, design, and height of the structure and its appurtenances, its scale with reference to its surroundings, and the nature and intensity of the use, shall not have an adverse effect on the surrounding environment....”**

The potential loss to Durham (the “significant wildlife habitat...mature tree lines, scenic views, and viewsheds” as explicitly forbidden in our Conditional Use ordinance!) goes far beyond the harm to those of us whose homes are within sight of the Church Hill woods. The many hundreds of residents who live on small in-town lots cherish the College Brook greenway and whatever wooded areas we have downtown. This is true in all cities. Conversely, as has also long been the case, the “landed gentry” often devalue the small green areas that urban dwellers treasure.

Indeed, at the prior meeting for Preliminary Design Review, one articulate resident who lives on a 4.5-acre property (and referred to his having another 250 acres across from College Woods) mocked those of us who refer to Church Hill as an “urban forest.” That resident’s house lot is about 14 times the size of the typical house lot on Thompson Lane (the street that leads into the wooded path from Faculty Road to the Chesley Marsh and the rear pedestrian/bike entrance to the Mill Plaza). Thus, our no-doubt well-meaning neighbor may be limited in his ability to grasp the in-town experience.

I sincerely hope, however, that Board members are aware of the fact that referring to the wooded areas in our neighborhood as “Urban Forests” is completely in keeping with current thinking. As the US Department of Agriculture notes: **“Urban forests come in many different shapes and sizes. They include urban parks, street trees, landscaped boulevards, gardens, river and coastal promenades, greenways, river corridors, wetlands, nature preserves, shelter belts of trees, and working trees at former industrial sites.”** [www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/urban-forests](http://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/urban-forests)

Similarly, the TreePeople organization writes: **“An urban forest can be broadly defined as a network of all the publicly and privately-owned trees and forests in and around cities.”**

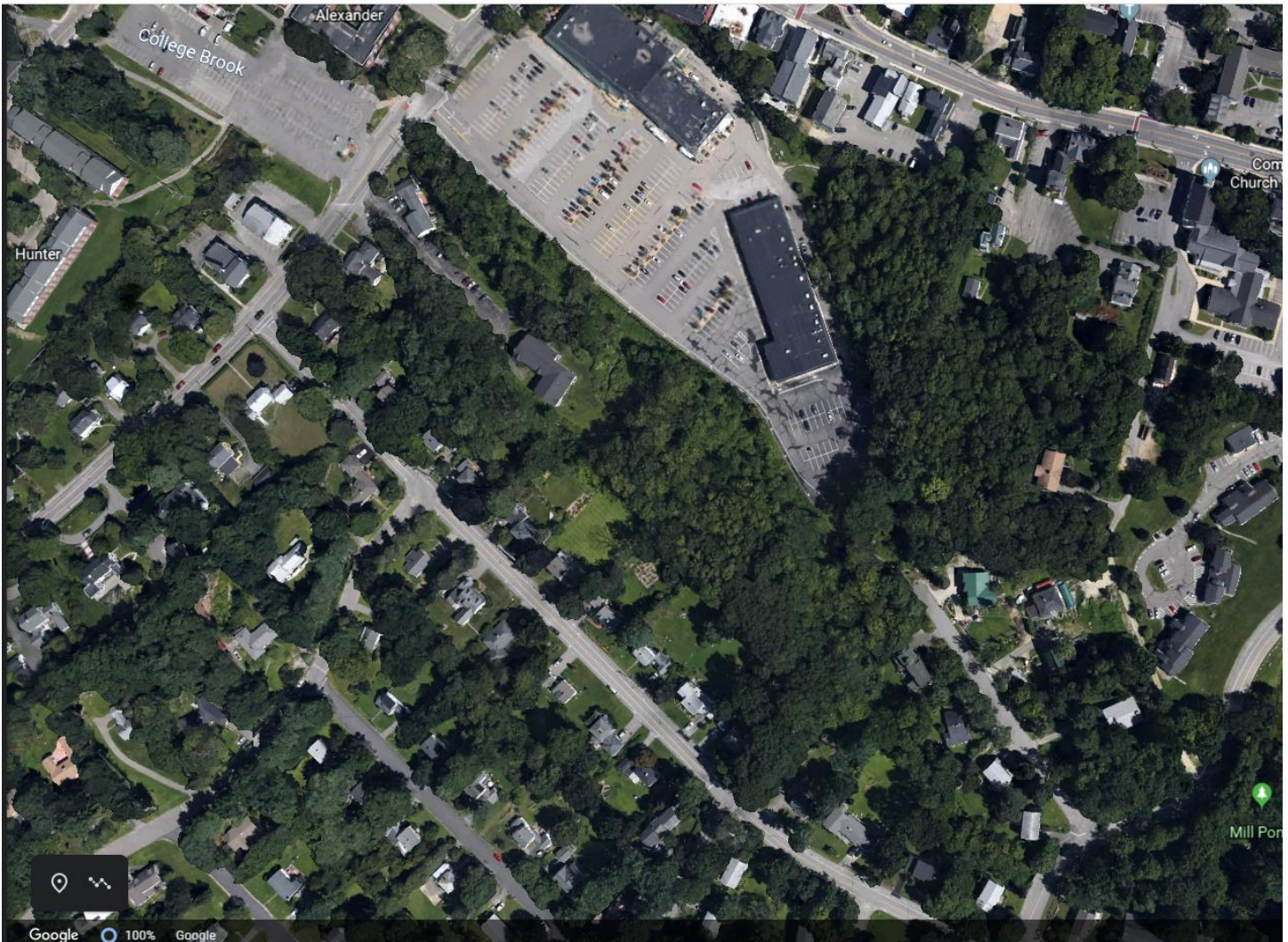
TreePeople lists multiple benefits that communities enjoy from Urban Forests, such as Church Hill:

- Reducing the urban heat island effect

- Improving water supply and water quality
- Mitigating stormwater runoff and flooding
- Improving air quality
- Sequestering carbon and combating climate change
- Producing food
- Conserving energy
- Increasing jobs, business, and the green economy
- Providing wildlife habitat
- Enhancing community cohesion
- Improving human health and well-being
- Increasing property values

See [www.treepeople.org/urbanforest](http://www.treepeople.org/urbanforest)

Google Earth images clearly indicate that what we have downtown (and would lose a chunk of if this massive parking lot proposal goes through) more than meets the “Urban Forest” criteria:



<https://earth.google.com/web/@43.1316706,-70.92422384,36.36364134a,724.72732857d,35y,-0h,0t,0r/data=CkkaRxJBCiUweDg5ZTI5MzgyMzEyMWQyZml6MmHiOTHiNjMxNTAzNWQ2NWZkGXZTymSlkUVAIarOD8hKu1HAKgZEdXJoYW0YASAB>

Those of us living next to Church Hill were also told by our “landed-gentry” neighbor that we ought to be wise enough to prefer to have such a Conditional Use parking lot over the many Permitted uses. But as the closest abutter (Peter Andersen) responded, we would indeed prefer a well-sited permitted building on the lot rather than a citadel of 24-hour moving cars, trucks, engine noise, headlights, lamppost glare, people talking, snow plows, oil, gas, fumes, etc., and the critical loss of natural stormwater “treatment” from trees on a lot that flows down toward the College Brook flood zone. – j m