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Durham Planning Board  
Durham, NH 03824

Dear Members of the Planning Board,

Thank you for your extensive service to the Town of Durham and for your multiple-topic brain capacity, which far exceeds mine.

***I submit here a written version of my oral comments at the August 26, 2020 Planning Board meeting regarding the Council-initiated Zoning Amendments for Downtown Durham.***

As you know, I often have a lot to say about pending issues, often more than meets the preference of some members of the Board. Thus, you may find it a bit odd that tonight I have essentially no comments – that is, no comments about the *substance* of the “Council-Initiated Zoning Changes.”

Yet, my having nothing to say about the *substance* of the amendments at this moment, nothing to say about such profound changes to the core of Durham, is actually my key *procedural* point. I echo what former Town Councilor [Dr. Alan Bennett](#) and [Beth Olshansky](#) have written to you: **How many typically concerned members of the public (*beyond those who own property downtown*) are prepared even to study closely the proposed Amendments, let alone participate fully in such so-called “Public” Hearings during a devastating pandemic?**

I do applaud you and other officials in Town for fostering a semblance of normalcy for residents during the Covid-19 crisis. Yet, a “*semblance* of normalcy” is not the type of normalcy that generates public focus and engagement on such major proposed zoning amendments. Typical democratic processes are humbled right now. And that reality needs to be acknowledged, confronted, accepted – and adapted to. Proposals such as these, which (to the minimal extent that I can grasp them at this moment) could forever change the character of the core of Durham, need the full attention of *all* Durham residents. As Alan Bennett wrote: “Zooming doesn’t work the same as an open hearing.”

As both a senior citizen and someone very familiar with UNH undergraduate behavior, I am in a heightened state of concern about the possible surge in Covid-19 from the returning thousands of UNH students to Durham. In this, I am far from alone among my Durham age peers and

many others of all ages. But as I can tell from emails and texts I've been getting every day, there's much more. Many Durham residents are:

- dealing with the stress of disruptions to their children's schooling and their own work routines,
- distracted by concerns about their health and the health of near & far family members,
- in (or fearful of) profound states of economic challenge, and
- distracted by the upcoming elections and balancing the concerns over the risks of in-person voting and the reliability of the Post Office for mail-in voting.

Indeed, there are even fears that our country's democracy may not survive a disputed election in November.

These proposed Zoning changes may be a godsend for Durham, or not. Whatever the case, they are being *proposed from within the Town's government* (not from external applicants who may demand that there be no delays in review), and public hearings on them need to happen when the **public** is able to participate fully in "Public" Hearings. As Dr. Bennett and Beth Olshansky note: **Full public participation is simply not possible now.** (Moreover, it's a bit unsettling that the Board has invited our comments on the Amendments tonight without even first outlining *at this meeting* what the Amendments entail and *why* they are being proposed.)

Beyond all the distractions mentioned above, many older Durham citizens who have a long track record of attending and speaking at meetings (and influencing Board and Council votes) lack the technological skills to participate by Zoom and are too fearful of Covid-19 to risk physically attending the hybrid meetings. I urge you to delay such profound Zoning considerations until the public can focus on:

- reading the documents
- analyzing the implications of the proposals,
- walking relevant sites downtown,
- asking questions,
- offering opinions and suggestions, and also
- hearing and feeling the reactions of all the people in live, in-person gatherings.

Again, you – as superhuman Board Members – no doubt have brain power for multiple topics and details beyond those of mere mortals, but the PUBLIC that deserves to be included in Public Hearings has a lot of mere mortals among them.

Please wait until the average members of the public can engage. That would be in the tradition of Durham's cherished democratic principles. Marginalizing public input would be alien to our history and values.

Sincerely,  
*Joshua Meyrowitz*