

September 22, 2020

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board:

I hope you are all well. I wanted to share some thoughts about the proposed zoning amendments before you.

Durham's commercial landscape has been hit especially hard by the pandemic because, for years, the town administration has catered excessively to UNH while gradually alienating full-time residents. Incredibly, these amendments double down on that risky strategy, betting the future of the town on more downtown student housing and more cheap eats.

The proposed zoning amendments were conceived by a small, town-appointed, working group that did not include a single member of the public. A majority of the working group was comprised of the town administrator and those who are paid to work for him. No wonder public discussion of such an important matter has been negligible.

The proposed changes are inconsistent with Durham's Master Plan which, as you know, was developed through a public process with the benefit of extensive public input. A glaring example of this contradiction is the proposed allowance of five story buildings, when the Master Plan calls for a maximum of three stories and four stories only under certain, narrow circumstances.

The amendments appear to be proposed in knee-jerk fashion, as if made in a state of panic, without considering their implications. A prime example is the welcoming of drive-thru oriented fast-food chains, which have long been marginalized in Durham. This will both exacerbate what is already a bad traffic situation along Route 108 and put the final nail in the coffin of Durham's struggling downtown eateries. Fewer of Durham's dollars will stay local.

Presumably these amendments are proposed with the goal of increasing Durham's tax base and reducing taxation on Durham residents. However, the historical record shows that development in Durham has brought about commensurate spending by the town and failed to bring about any tax relief whatsoever.

In short, these amendments, which encourage high rise dormitories in the Central Business District and open the floodgates to national fast-food chains, will continue Durham's race to the bottom -- aesthetically, logistically, and economically. Surely this is not a well thought out strategy, and certainly Durham deserves a real economic development strategy rather than throwing in the towel.

Sincerely,

Matt Komonchak