

**From:** [Michael Behrendt](#)  
**Subject:** Tom Elliott's comments in support of proposed zoning changes before the Durham Planning Board tonight (10/14/2020)  
**Date:** Wednesday, October 14, 2020 9:56:16 PM

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To the Planning Board,  
Please see the comments from Tom Elliott below about the proposed zoning amendments.

## Michael Behrendt

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**From:** Tom Elliott, EV [mailto:tom@elliott.ventures]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, October 14, 2020 6:18 PM  
**To:** Michael Behrendt  
**Cc:** Christine J. Soutter; Al Howland; pnrasm@yahoo.com; Todd Selig; Sarah Wrightsman  
**Subject:** Tom Elliott's comments in support of proposed zoning changes before the Durham Planning Board tonight (10/14/2020)

Michael,

Kindly provide these comments to the planning board at tonight's Planning Board meeting. If there is an opportunity for someone to read these aloud, please do.

My family resides at 26 Edgewood Road. I maintain a business office at 20 Madbury Road. We moved to Durham in 2009 and I've been involved in downtown redevelopment and policymaking for much of that time, first as chair of the EDC and later as a consultant to a potential redeveloper. (Full disclosure- I am no longer a

paid consultant to Tim Elliott and his proposed project at 66 Main Street.)

Whenever tweaks to our zoning ordinance are proposed in the service of improving downtown Durham, I try to step back and ask two questions:

1.) How do we define a successful Downtown Durham?

2.) Will these zoning changes contribute to achieving that vision of success, or detract from it?

First, to define success we can refer to many, many pages in our recent Master Plan devoted to the downtown core.

Here are but a few passages to guide a widely shared definition of success:

*Vision: The Central Business District will be an attractive and vibrant commercial center of the community where desirable retail and commercial growth occurs in a safe and friendly environment. (Page DCC-9)*

*Goal: Increase diversity by attracting young professionals and families to Durham. (Page LU-3)*

*Goal Integrate Smart Growth principles into redevelopment as well as new construction housing projects. (Page LU-3)*

*Goal: Encourage a wide range of retail and other commercial uses in downtown Durham. (Page LU-6)*

*Goal: Modify the zoning ordinance to encourage multi-story buildings that make more efficient use of sites with a smaller footprint than the historical sprawling design that covers more surface area and consists of only one or two stories. (Page LU-6)*

There are many more goals and recommendations in the Master Plan to quote, all pointing to the same overarching vision for our downtown. Our Master Plan is grounded in a broadly shared community understanding of what Downtown Durham *should* become, given the right policies, incentives, and entrepreneurs coming together.

Now comes the second question: do these zoning proposals before you tonight contribute to, or detract from, achievement of this vision?

When I first examined the language in this proposal, my reflex was to be cautious. Would taller buildings necessarily lead to more student housing in the downtown core?

Given how little land we have left to redevelop, and given the student housing explosion that drove our 2009-2014 redevelopment frenzy, I can't support policy changes that catalyze more student housing development. I would rather we sit tight and await what I expect is coming (and

which COVID has accelerated by a decade): the financial reckoning and implosion of higher education. Better to wait than to waste our precious few re-developable acres.

However, I've now studied these proposed changes carefully and discussed them with proponents. Upon further review, I believe that these proposed changes are not likely to catalyze student-focused re-development. If you fear more student housing, please take note: our "Minimum Lot Area Per Dwelling Unit" requirement remains unchanged. This is our most effective vaccine against the spread of student housing development downtown.

And even better, the "minimum habitable floor area per occupant" will be RAISED from 300 sq' to 400 sq' for a select number of properties on Main Street that we all sense may be redeveloped in the near future. (I think I understand that accurately, but somebody please correct me if I have this wrong.)

If these proposed zoning changes encourage anything, it's the development of professional housing. This might be the single most positive catalyst to changing downtown Durham I've seen in the past decade.

For all these reasons, I enthusiastically support the proposed zoning changes before you, and encourage the Planning Board to do the same.

Many thanks,

Tom Elliott  
26 Edgewood Road