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Subject: Letter to the Planning Board re: Zoning Amendments 1-11-2021 from the Durham Housing Subcommittee
Date: Monday, January 11, 2021 4:37:18 PM

Durham Planning Board
Via EMAIL

January 11, 2020

Chairman Rasmussen,

Thank you for this opportunity to express our strong support for the proposed Central Business District-related zoning amendments currently before the board.

As you know, Durham's Economic Development Committee established a subcommittee in 2019 to focus on the quantity and affordability of housing in Durham. Included in our subcommittee's charter is an objective to "address relevant Town boards and committees on housing issues in the community."

The shortage of affordable housing is a well-established concern for all New Hampshire, but it is an urgent situation for Durham's employers. In 2020 our local market's *median* two-bedroom rental price climbed to over \$1,500/month- for which you often find low-quality, student-class apartments in Dover or Newmarket.

At a time when our downtown office inventory is becoming more affordable to a broader mix of community-oriented businesses and entrepreneurs, their adult-aged employees will need to live further and further away- or not commute to Durham all, preventing discretionary lunchtime spending from ever benefiting our restaurants and retailers.

Instead of leveraging this COVID moment to broaden our professional customer base, civic volunteer ranks, and overall community diversity, Durham's scarce and expensive housing dampers the demographic renewal effect that many NH communities are currently experiencing- especially in their vibrant and historic commercial downtowns.

When discussing our goal to effect more housing in Durham, the subcommittee has identified the town's restrictive zoning ordinance as a key impediment. As 2021

unfolds, the subcommittee intends to identify a number of proposed changes to the town's overall regulatory approach, changes meant to encourage additional housing in appropriate zones like the Central Business District (CBD), Coe's Corner, and other zones where residential development is appropriate.

But because of the public hearing scheduled for January 13th, we would like to comment more immediately on the proposed amendments before you.

As a general policy statement, the subcommittee fully supports the 2015 Master Plan and its hopeful intention to see the Central Business District redeveloped through a mix of commercial and residential uses.

Hope is not a strategy, and well-meaning intentions must be backed by effective policy. Our collective experience in Durham has led the subcommittee to conclude that **mixed use redevelopment of our Central Business District will remain impractical unless or until we actively *encourage* building heights greater than three stories**. Developers seeking bank financing simply can't afford a mixed use project that doesn't make appropriate market use of the sixty feet of airspace above their tiny lots- even with tax subsidies or other public assistance.

For this reason, we concur with the 56% of Durham residents cited in our 2015 Master Plan who "somewhat agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the town should "allow commercial or mixed residential-commercial building heights greater than 4 stories in downtown."

We are also aware of language included in the 2015 Master Plan suggesting that a redeveloped downtown should have "*a human scale of primarily two and three, and under special circumstances, four-story buildings.*" While we agree with the desire for redevelopment to be "human-scale," we disagree strongly that four and five-story buildings are contrary to a reasonable definition of "human-scale."

Here are seven NH examples of four-story and five-story buildings that contribute to the vibrancy of their downtown communities:

- **Exeter's 2007 Squamscott Block** has won numerous architectural and workforce housing awards;

- **Peterborough's 1847 Granite Block**, offering a dozen office and retail units in the heart of the Monadnock region;
- **The Hanover Inn** is over 200 years old and remains the centerpiece of Dartmouth College and Hanover's Main Street;
- **Plymouth's** stately 1911 **Draper & Maynard Building** commands the north end of Main Street, and serves as the home to PSU's art department and an award-winning gallery;
- **Lebanon's 1893 National Bank Building** anchors its Colburn Park Historic District, while the elegant four-story 1911 **Rogers House** provides senior housing with its impressive portico facing the park;
- **The New London Inn** dates to 1870 and is the backdrop to the town green and skating pond.

Each of these seven buildings is *celebrated* in its host community as an economic cornerstone and architectural treasure.

Many of these facades have become literally *postcard views* sold in gift shops to memorialize the "quintessential New England village character."

All six towns are *smaller* than Durham (per the 2010 census).

And in our opinion, each of these communities has preserved considerably more "**rural character**" than Durham's downtown, by any reasonable definition you use.

We urge the Planning Board to ignore the misguided notion that four and five-story buildings have somehow become inconsistent with "human scale" development in the past 150 years. These grand buildings not only *improve* the New England downtown experience; they help *define* it.

If enacted soon, the board's proposed zoning amendments could inspire a 21st century homage to one of these seven tall treasures. The citizens of Durham would be very grateful for the private sector to fund an iconic addition to Main Street, a catalytic anchor that enhances NH's flagship state university center and provides highly desired and adult-oriented housing, professional offices, public gathering space, and modern retail at the street level.

To address the specifics of the Board's latest draft, we support leveraging the conditional use process to guide any five-story building proposed for the CBD. We also support the 60 foot overall height limit.

The proposed definition for building height is clear and reasonable, and we further endorse the flexible distribution of commercial uses within buildings of three stories or higher, as well as the inclusion of outdoor public space as a potential use to meet the mixed use criteria.

Our subcommittee takes no position on the issue of drive-in facilities, as this falls outside our purview.

Our only reservation regarding these proposed amendments is the continued restriction on building height for the approximately twenty parcels referenced in Section 8 and 9. We see no practical reason to limit building height on these properties, particularly given the intensifying economic headwinds brought on by COVID-19 and the scarcity of development land in the CBD.

However, we also recognize that these targeted limits were enacted in 2012 and will remain in effect regardless of adoption of these proposed amendments. Given that reality, we appreciate and support the lowering of the "minimum habitable floor area per occupant in unrelated household" threshold to 250 square feet.

In conclusion, we want to state that these proposed zoning amendments are an exemplar of the type of zoning reform needed to encourage more housing opportunities in Durham.

We look forward to working with the Planning Board in 2021 to craft additional ordinance changes, in pursuit of our chartered objective to "recognize, promote, enhance, encourage, and develop a balanced and diverse supply of housing that

meets the economic, social, and physical needs of Durham and its residents.”

Sincerely,

Tom Elliott
Subcommittee Chair

On behalf of its volunteer members:

Sarah Wrightsman
Al Howland
Sally Tobias
Charlotte Hitchcock
Mimi Kell
Richard England

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