

July 24, 2022

Re: 19-21 Main Street proposed parking lot

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board,

Durham is in the midst of an unprecedented heat wave, but it is not just Durham. The entire region has been under health advisories this summer. In fact, 28 U.S. states are experiencing unprecedented high temperatures. Europe is burning up. Back in June 2018, the Union of Concerned Scientists warned that [periods of extreme heat are here to stay](#). This July's unprecedented heat wave makes clear the truth of those claims.

In 2022, hundreds of top scientists from 195 countries contributed to the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) Report, which is then reviewed by thousands of additional experts. ([The IPCC provides the most conclusive endorsement yet of nature as a climate solution](#).) The 2022 report notes "that reducing the destruction of ecosystems, restoring them, and improving the management of working lands, like farms, are among the most effective options for mitigating carbon emissions." In the report, trees are also a highly valued commodity.

Climate Change may not be news to you. **But you have before you an opportunity to "think globally and act locally," based on your mandate to "promote health and the general welfare," according to RSA 674:17 and our Zoning Ordinance and Site Plan Regulations.** (Please review the [Purpose Statement](#) of our Site Plan Regulations, regulations which, to date, have been barely touched upon.)

If you question the connection between climate change and the community's health, remember everything you have read (and personally experienced) about the "heat island effect"—including that the surface of a parking lot could itself be as much as 20 degrees hotter than the air temperature—and consider how extreme heat affects the human body. (I don't know about you, but I have to wonder how anyone would want to live next to such a "furnace" during the summer months.)

In light of both current heat wave impacts and the ongoing global crisis, it seems ludicrous that the Durham Planning Board appears to be positioning itself on July 27 to approve an out-of-scale, out-of-compliance, heat-island-creating parking lot to replace a forested hillside **that currently provides ecosystem services that help offset climate change**, e.g., filtration of nitrogen, sequestration of carbon, and passive cooling. Additionally, a large parking lot built to provide rental spaces for UNH student cars in the heart of our compact downtown defies reason. In addition to being contrary to our Master Plan, it will add more greenhouse gases to our atmosphere and more congestion to our downtown. (Here, I do not repeat the many dozens of letters you have received spelling out precisely why such a plan does not comply with our Conditional Use criteria nor our Site Plan Regulations.)

Align with Town Council Goals

Our [Town Council Goals](#) make clear that Durham strives to be a leader in addressing climate change. Our **elected officials** approved this language just months ago:

Pursue long-term environmental sustainability and resiliency taking into account existing and predicted impacts of climate change...

- Take steps that reflect Durham’s commitment to the mission of the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (GCOM), to include the development of a Climate Action Plan (CAP) to reduce Durham greenhouse gas emissions 68 million pounds (35.5%) by 2030, enabling Durham to be more resilient in the face of anticipated impacts associated with climate change.

Furthermore, for years the Goals asked that the community work together with the Council to achieve these goals, as updated in this year’s language:

Leverage town committees and subcommittees to develop tactical plans to align with the broader goals of the Council...

During your deliberations on June 22 and July 13, I did not hear members of the Planning Board (including the Council Reps) nor our Town Planner raise the issue of aligning the Board’s actions with our Town Council Goals. I did hear, however, some surprisingly contrived rationalizations for approving an application that clearly does not meet our regulations.

Perhaps the pittance of tax revenue this parking lot will bring in has also escaped the Board’s notice. (See [Robin Mower’s letter of 7/21/22](#) in which she includes Gail Jablonski’s statement that the tax benefit for Durham households will be less than \$5.00 per year *total*. That’s ignoring Board member Nick Germain’s caution that this tiny increase could well be offset by the negative impact on abutters’ property values.)

To argue “benefit to the Town” on the basis of fiscal impact is specious. ***To ignore all the negative environmental and social impacts is pure folly.***

One has only to take seriously the language of our Zoning Ordinance and Site Plan Regulations to see that the Board must deny this proposal. No, this does not mean Toomerfs can do nothing with their land. However, an enormous student rental parking lot (nearly half the number of Mill Plaza parking spaces) in our tiny Church Hill District is the absolute worst option for reducing the impacts of climate change. It also does not align with the [Purpose of the Church Hill District](#) (pg. 9), our Master Plan for our Commercial Core, nor our Town Council Goals.

This principal use is not permitted by right. “The purpose and intent of a Conditional Use permit is to allow certain uses that are not normally permitted under conventional zoning provisions....,” and the Board is charged with ensuring “that the Conditional Use will have a positive economic, fiscal, public safety, environmental, aesthetic, and social impact on the town,” instructs section 175-21 of the zoning ordinance.

I urge the Durham Planning Board to turn down this application using the tools afforded to you by our Zoning Ordinance and Site Plan Regulations. In aligning your decision with our Town Council Goals, you will be doing a great service to our community.

Respectfully Submitted,

Beth Olshansky
122 Packers Falls Road