

December 3, 2020

Historic District Commission  
8 Newmarket Road  
Durham, NH 03824

*RE: 19-21 Main Street – Parking Lot & Entrance. Proposal to construct a new parking lot and new entrance. The total number of parking spaces will be 183 for a net increase on the lot of 140 additional spaces. The front two lots are located in the Historic District. Pete Murphy and Tim Murphy c/o Toomerfs, LLC, owner. Mike Sievert, MJS Engineering, engineer. Robbi Woodburn, landscape architect. Map 5, Lots 1-9 & 1-10.*

Dear Commissioners,

I write in agreement with Andrea Bodo, whose knowledge informed the HDC for nearly 20 years: The proposed “boulevard”-style access is inappropriate for our Historic District.

Please schedule a public hearing so that other residents may be notified and given the opportunity to submit their comments.

### **Width of access lanes**

Where have any of us seen—among late 18th-century buildings, set in a historic district, along a major thoroughfare—the type of driveway proposed?

I am no expert in historic architecture, but it seems that the proposed double driveway both is anachronistic and contextually detracts from the Red Tower building—an icon of the community. At the very least, it seems unnecessarily wide.

The applicant has perhaps chosen to refer to the access by the term “boulevard” unwisely. Boulevards, defined in part by having two lanes separated by a median, were designed for an urban environment. Typically they are grand—often lined with grand architectural structures and leading to a prominent building or view. While they accommodate motor vehicles, they may also include bike lanes, walkways, and communal green spaces. They command—in fact, demand—a great deal of space.

Durham is a tiny town, more rural than urban. Buildings are crammed together on Main Street. Red Tower is among the few that retain a smidgen of its original graceful setting. Both Red Tower and the Community Church spire inform vistas along Main Street from both east and west. It would be a shame to obscure those views or diminish their stature by constructing an access nearly the width of the Red Tower building itself.

### **Historic character of the property | Registers of Historic Resources**

Section 175-96. Standards for Review, of our zoning ordinance states:

The following standards shall be used by the HDC in reviewing applications for Certificates of Approval.

## A. General Principles

2. The distinguishing original qualities or character of the property shall not be destroyed. The removal or alteration of any historic material or distinctive architectural features shall be avoided where possible.

In addition, the “Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation”—posted on the Commission’s website—notes that (emphasis added):

- Related new construction – including buildings, **driveways**, parking lots, landscape improvements and other new features – **must not alter the historic character of a property**. A property’s historic function must be evident even if there is a change of use.
- Protecting the **historic setting and context of a property**, including the degree of open space and building density, must always be considered when planning new construction on an historic site. This entails identifying the formal or informal arrangements of buildings on the site, **and whether they have a distinctive urban, suburban, or rural character. For example, a historic building traditionally surrounded by open space must not be crowded with dense development.**
- As with new additions, the massing, size, scale, and architectural features of new construction on the site of a historic building must be compatible with those of the historic building. **When visible and in close proximity to historic buildings, the new construction must be subordinate to these buildings.** New construction should also be distinct from the old and must not attempt to replicate historic buildings elsewhere on site and to avoid creating a false sense of historic development.

In addition, among other questions the Commission presumably must address is whether this proposed construction would have an impact on the District’s position on national or state Registers of Historic Places.

## The Master Plan

The Historic Resources chapter of the Master Plan, adopted in 2015, opens with Our Vision:

*Through 2025 and beyond, Durham recognizes that historical resources are irreplaceable and contribute to quality of life and sense of place. We therefore value the recognition, enhancement, and continued use of buildings, structure, burial grounds, sites, areas, districts, and roads having historical, architectural, cultural, or archeological significance to Durham.*

## Seeds of doubt

Where the applicant may see the proposed access changes as solving two problems, i.e., providing “needed” parking and addressing a safety concern (access from an existing parking lot onto a heavily traveled, hilly Main Street), I see several counter arguments.

However, arguments regarding the first are not germane to the Commission: Your job is to determine whether the proposal is appropriate for the specific site and for the District.

Were the second argument, i.e., traffic safety, backed by historical evidence and a real-world understanding of human behavior of the most-likely renters of the proposed parking spaces, i.e., young people/ UNH students, I would listen more sympathetically.

That said, I do appreciate the challenge of trying to accommodate “modern” changes within a Historic District, both for the Commission and for the property owner. Some modifications may be made in relative conformity with the original era. But where elements of a building may sometimes be made with agreed-upon compromises and to lesser aesthetic and educational impact, it seems to me that recently Durham has wobbled. Over the decades, student rentals and leased parking have made significant inroads on Church Hill. That path has been destroying the contextual settings of the buildings.

At what point does the Historic District cease to be historic? At what point is the community willing to let the central portion of our District slip away? At some point, why bother to maintain the buildings?

We don’t really know how residents view the Historic District, its structures and settings. But we do know that in 2011, the survey for the Master Plan update asked:

How important are the following attributes to making Durham a place where you will want to live during the next ten to twenty years?

Among the responses:

- Small new England town character: 86 % overall positive (43% very; 43% somewhat important)
- Traditional historic architectural character: 71% overall positive (27% very; 44% somewhat important)

### **Another avenue of discussion**

At the risk of raising charges of “horse trading,” I would ask the Commission also to discuss with the applicants what they are willing to bring to the table in terms of meaningful improvements and restoration to the building itself and its surrounding grounds.

A minor example: At the November 10 Technical Review Group meeting, Town Planner Michael Behrendt questioned the choice of pavers for the access. He was told that a different choice would cost the client more. To be very blunt, if this proposal goes forward, that incremental cost would benefit the District and the community far more than it would enlarge the hole in the client’s pockets.

### **In conclusion**

As the current stewards of our historic resources, you stand on the shoulders of many who brought great knowledge, understanding, and fortitude to protect our heritage. Please keep that in mind during your deliberations.

Sincerely yours,

Robin