

Benefits of the Church Hill Parking Lot

Comments to the Durham Planning Board

Dennis Meadows; March 23, 2022

Before the Planning Board can vote to approve a conditional use permit application, Durham's zoning code explicitly requires you to compare the proposed project with other uses in the zone. Of course you have to restrict your discussion to the project put before you. But you must judge whether the benefits to the town of that proposed project warrant giving it special permission to violate our standard zoning code.

Permitted uses in the Church Hill zone include conservation, forestry, farmers' market, rabbit husbandry and beekeeping, various modes of residences, and nursing homes. Obviously the parking lot is less attractive to Durham than any of those. Therefore Toomerfs ignores them and asks you to compare its parking lot project only with other parking lots.

There is a better way to understand the benefits of the Toomerf project. I propose that you compare it with another effort to modify an existing parking lot in the historic district of Durham.

Consider the Tideline Public House proposed by Karen and Scott Letourneau on the site of the former town hall.

The two projects can be compared in eight ways:

1. Jobs

Tideline will create 17 to 20 new jobs in town. Toomerfs' project will create zero jobs.

2. Diversity

Tideline will bring new dining options, a gourmet food and wine shop, and family entertainment into central Durham. The Toomerfs project will bring more cars.

3. History

Tideline will restore historical structures in Durham. Toomerfs' project requires the demolition of a house built over 100 years ago.

4. Environment

Tideline will remove asphalt and create a landscape. The parking lot will remove forest and create a large expanse of asphalt on top of more than 1000 dump trucks of fill.

5. Profits

Profits from Tideline will be used by Durham residents. The profits generated by Toomerfs will go to out-of-state developers.

6. Zoning

The Tideline project complies with Durham's zoning code. The Toomerfs project requires conditional use permission.

7. Neighborhood Impacts

Tideline will be built in an area where its light, noise, and traffic will affect few nearby residents. Its hours of operation will be restricted. Toomerf's parking lot will be adjacent to Durham's densest family neighborhood. Its parking lot will operate 24 hours a day seven days a week.

8. Public Support

When Scott Letourneau presented his preliminary ideas at the Historic District Commission meeting Council member Andrew Corrow said, "At first blush I see no negatives for this whatsoever. And this is something the town of Durham longs for."

That is quite a contrast with the parking lot. When I last counted there were 94 letters on the town web site. The great majority of them strongly oppose the Church Hill parking lot and describe many ways it will deteriorate the quality of life for Durham residents.

Durham residents need new dining options, shopping opportunities, meeting spaces, and a safe play area for our children. They do not need more traffic and noise in the center of their town.

In 2015 Scott Mitchell proposed to tear down the old town hall and replace it with a drive-through drug store. The town badly needed the money to cope with a large cost overrun encountered in building the new town hall. *Friday Updates* even described Mitchell's project as the highest and best use for the site. But finally the town decided to reject the proposal and wait for a better project. Now it is obvious that was the correct decision.

You are legally authorized to reject the Toomerf's request for a conditional use permit, strictly following the process described in Durham's zoning ordinance. That would be the correct decision. And if you do, Church Hill will also attract a better project.