

To: Michael Behrendt

From: Katherine Morgan

Date: 12/10/20

Dear Mr. Behrendt and Members of the Planning Board,

I'm writing to express my opposition to the impending creation of a parking lot on the steep, forested slope beginning at Church Hill and ending at Chesley Drive, one of the remaining green spaces in downtown Durham.

For a town that prides itself on the creation of bike lanes, sharrows and attempts to make Durham a walkable community, it seems to me that the addition of 180 +/- parking spaces which would be accessed from the Main Street at the top of a hill that is already severely congested at certain times of the day is completely ludicrous.

Beginning at about 4:00 p.m., a line of cars from the red light at the junction of Main Street and Rte. 108 often stretches back to the center of Town. Anyone trying to exit the Community Church parking lot at that time of day may sit for many minutes waiting for someone to allow them to enter. Pedestrians using the crosswalk at that point are also at the mercy of the traffic coming from both directions. The current congestion around the downtown loop Durham itself renders it almost impossible for emergency equipment to get through.

Beyond the congestion factor, however, and more important, in my opinion, is the fact that Durham is a town that prides itself on its sustainable footprint, its solar-powered municipal buildings and the growing number of private individuals with solar installations, better insulation, reduced water usage and general overall consciousness regarding energy use thanks to town-sponsored initiatives. Why, then, would the Planning Board acquiesce to a parking lot which removes a large stand of trees which we know are one of the mitigating factors in reducing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere? This is directly contrary to the values and principles on which we supposedly base our policy decisions.

It's not just the reduction of our ability to absorb carbon dioxide that concerns me, it is the active environmental/ecological degradation brought about by another paved area, which can only contribute to the problem of stormwater run-off with all the concomitant pollutants into College Brook which runs at the base of the forested slope. Snow removal in the winter will require salt and sand which will also end up in College Brook, and from there in the Oyster River. A worse site for a parking lot would be hard to imagine.

If the Planning Board genuinely serves the interests of the residents of Durham, this proposal should merit a quick rejection once the members of the Board begin to apply the regulations regarding Conditional Use permitting. Clearly stated in the guidelines, approved projects must "preserve identified natural...and scenic resources on the site and shall not degrade such identified resources on abutting properties" including "significant wildlife habitat...mature tree lines...scenic views, and viewsheds." Additionally, negative impacts on adjacent properties or

the neighborhood must be considered, in terms of many variables including (but not limited to) “traffic, noise, odors, vibrations, dust, fumes, hours of operation, and exterior lighting and glare.” The parking lot proposal will have all of these negative effects on the Chesley Road and Faculty Road neighborhoods.

Specifics related to the above paragraph include 14 - 18 foot tall light posts, a 25 foot retaining wall on the Chesley Rd. side of the parking lot, which will create a fortress-like effect; no baffling for noise; virtually unlimited hours of traffic coming and going, etc. There are additional statements about what “may” happen in the minutes of the site walk, which I think should be required: separating oil from water in the storm run-off and whether snow melting mechanisms will or won’t be used. I question the environmental viability of using “plastic chambers” to contain and treat the water, as plastic itself will degrade over time into the water.

I think it’s fair to ask “Who is served by this proposal?” Do the residents of Durham need an additional 185 parking spaces? I’d seriously like to hear the Planning Board answer this question. Whose pockets are going to be lined by the creation of more parking spaces? If it serves the developer of the Plaza who is currently selling parking spaces in the shopping plaza to students, then the increase in parking provided by this proposal is not going to make it easier for residents and others to shop or dine in downtown Durham.

If the owner of the parking lot is planning to sell/rent spaces to students, regardless of the status of the plaza development, then I have no doubt he will find students who are currently leaving their car outside of Durham and using public transportation or their bikes to come into town and who will gladly pay a fee to park locally. In my view, the owner of this property needs to be honest up front about who his clientele will be.

Planning Board members have an obligation to consider all of these factors before they approve a proposal which at present brings only negative effects to both the environment and the aesthetics of the Town of Durham whose residents they serve.

Katherine Morgan
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