

DLM Comments to the Town Council and Planning Board

I am Dennis Meadows. My home is at 34 Laurel Lane in Durham.

On DCAT I have listened to hours and hours of Council and Planning Board conversations and presentations about the proposed change in allowed building heights. I have not spoken publicly on the issue, because I consider the proposed revision to be totally irrelevant to the problems you should be addressing.

The Durham, New Hampshire Housing Task Force was formally established by the Durham Town Council on September 27, 2021.

Throughout its meandering discussions two goals have prevailed: (1) make more affordable housing available in town and (2) revive the central business district. Both goals have received wide and enthusiastic support. They were affirmed in Todd Selig's August 7, 2024 memo to Michael Behrendt. Both goals were mentioned in your December meeting. Nevertheless, data show that efforts to achieve them have completely failed.

In 2021, when the task force was established, the median house sales price in Durham was \$645,000. Now one report estimates it is \$844,000

When we moved here there were a dozen features of Durham that made it an attractive place for us to live and shop. Now most of them are gone, and they continue to disappear: drug store, hardware store, bike shop, traditional swimming pool, faculty club, UNH celebrity series, Zyla's, Mill Pond Center for the performing arts, New England Center, grange yoga classes, Youngs.

You tell the people of Durham we can reverse these years-long trends by raising the allowed height on a few buildings in the Central Business District. I hope none of you believes that; I know most Durham residents do not, because it is not true.

Housing prices will continue to rise, and the central business district will continue to languish until we acknowledge and accommodate to five inconvenient truths.

- 1. Everyone wants more low-cost housing in Durham; nobody wants it in their own neighborhood.**

- 2. Private developers will build to maximize their own profits not to enhance the attractiveness of Durham for its citizens. Roger Haydn made this clear in his comments at your last meeting, "I can sell the buildings; who gets its? I don't care, I'm leaving."**
- 3. Durham has no chance to compete directly with Dover, Exeter, or Portsmouth as a shopping destination or a site of low-cost housing. It will need to distinguish itself in other ways.**
- 4. Durham is facing existential problems, and there is no simple, quick, cheap way to reverse its decline. It will need to become special in some other way.**
- 5. Complicated problems require expert solutions. If you ask an amateur to solve a complicated problem, you will get an amateur solution. And if you try to compensate by assigning five or ten amateurs to the problem, you'll still get an amateur solution.**

Quit diddling around with minor zoning changes and amateur committees. Recognize that Durham needs some major new ideas to sustain it as a unique, attractive, financially viable community for the second quarter of this century. Find them, and make them happen!

Several long-term Durham residents have professional experience with urban revitalization. Enlist them and other experts in your effort. Identify and amplify Durham's unique strengths rather than making changes that can only make Durham an inferior copy of Portsmouth. There are so many ideas that might make Durham uniquely attractive.

Peyton and Julian spoke the truth at the Planning Board meeting last month. We can't revive Durham, until we find ways to attract people downtown.

We have put crucial Durham facilities on the periphery, where they pull people out of the CBD (police department, library, town hall, Recreation Department). Instead, create something that gives appeal and pedestrian traffic to our center.

I'll give one as an example.

Make Jenkins Court into a car-free zone, and use the Plaza for parking. Redevelop some of the underutilized space nearby as a community center that would give people some reason to be downtown for extended periods. The community center could have a small theater for local artists, a coffee shop where people hang out and talk to their neighbors, a display space for local artists, a space for practicing yoga or tai chi or a foreign language, meeting rooms where groups can meet to discuss issues of common interest.

To save Durham, we need to think big and think outside of the box. Of course every major initiative will draw criticism. All will pose problems, and none of them is certain to work. But a constructive plan would find in Durham great political and financial support rather than opposition,

And you would be spending your time on ideas that might actually achieve your goal.

Thank you.

Dennis Meadows