

March 25, 2026

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board,

Thank you for your service to the Town – for as many hours as I have spent reading, digesting, and responding to proposals about our town, I am aware that you have spent far more.

I am frustrated and concerned that you may not fully understand how strongly we feel, how deeply we care about this town, we call home. For months, I—along with dozens of others—have participated in public hearing after public hearing at both the Town Council and the Planning Board. We have urged you and other town officials to exercise moderation; not to abandon our Master Plan or Architectural Design Standards; and, most of all, to adopt zoning that supports a redeveloped downtown built with an eye toward human scale—one that is aesthetically appealing and welcoming both to residents and to the developers and businesses who want to help create a vibrant, engaging community we can all be proud to call home.

Instead, it feels as though we are banging our collective heads against a wall—trapped in a time warp reminiscent of *Groundhog Day*, but worse. Rather than re-living the same proposal, each new one seems more extreme than the last.

While drafting this statement, I came across a letter I wrote to Town Councilors on August 4 of last year. In it, I urged them to reject a proposed amendment allowing **four- and five-story** height limits along the core stretch of Main Street. Others and I advocated for a more moderate limit of **three and a half stories**. A total of 252 people signed a letter calling for a more nuanced approach—one aligned with the Durham Master Plan and our Architectural Design Standards. Our signatures, along with numerous public statements, appear to have fallen on deaf ears.

Six months later, on February 16, despite a second letter signed by 244 residents (342 individuals across both letters), along with additional testimony, the Town Council voted to allow **four-story/50-foot** buildings with no roofline stipulations. Now, only a month later, we are here again—pushing back against proposals for **five-story** buildings, with heights that have grown from **42 feet to 60 feet**.

What is going on? It certainly feels as though we are being ignored. It appears that a small group—originating from the Downtown Subcommittee of the Housing Task Force—has advanced a particular agenda through multiple boards and committees, with at least some members participating at every stage of the process.

Yes, we need more housing. But key questions remain unanswered:

Have proponents demonstrated that these taller buildings will provide *affordable* housing?

Is there any assurance that new apartments will meet the needs of local workers, young couples, or families—not just transient renters?

Will these units remain affordable over time?

Where will residents park?

And would working adults and families realistically choose to live alongside large student populations?

I know of an older working resident who, after a divorce, moved into an in-town apartment and loved its location—only to leave because persistent noise from student neighbors made it impossible for to maintain a sleep schedule conducive to going to work each morning. In more than 30 years living here, aside from Riverwoods, I am not aware of new in-town housing built for anyone other than students.

We do not need more student housing. Enrollment at UNH is declining. If the current bill allowing firearms on campus becomes law, that trend may accelerate. UNH now mandates that first and second year students live on campus. Students have expressed a preference for living downtown, so it is likely that the student housing on the edges of town will be empty as before as students move into town. Do we want to add more student housing and have Main Street shift even further toward student-oriented businesses and transient occupancy?

**Is there compelling evidence that increasing building height will achieve the stated goals?**

More recently, some residents—understandably concerned about rising property taxes—have supported large-scale development as a solution. However, available data (such as Councilor Em Friedrichs presented at the Council meeting on February 16, 2026), suggests these proposals will not significantly reduce tax burdens. While the concern is valid, the proposed remedy is not.

I raised concerns last August that these proposals had not been properly vetted. I have yet to see evidence that meaningful additional analysis has occurred in the intervening months.

Visual materials presented at prior hearings suggest that lower buildings with pitched roofs would be far more compatible with our town's character. Have alternative models or 3D renderings been explored? Do decision-makers—and residents—fully understand what 60-foot buildings will look like in our downtown? Structures like Holloway Commons and 10

Pettee Brook Road already feel imposing, and they sit on wider streets than Jenkins Court. Five-story buildings on Jenkins Court are simply out of scale.

### **Why are we pursuing proposals that contradict our own planning documents?**

I live in the Faculty Neighborhood and walk regularly. Some days I favor the natural beauty of forests and water. But many days, I will incorporate some shopping or a trip to the Post Office into my stroll. The walk down to the Plaza and then up Mill Road, or looping around the Mill Pond, past Town Hall, and back home via Main Street – this scenery I move through on foot and sometimes on wheels, has been the backdrop to my daily life for over thirty years. I try to imagine 5 stories/60 ft as seen from my Mill Road approach and I find the vision overwhelming. Four-story heights feel overbuilt enough! I think of 5 stories/60 feet at the corner of Main and Jenkins, it's heartbreaking. And along Jenkins Court, unthinkable.

This is not why I chose to live here.

I have lived in larger cities. I prefer the walkability, beauty, quiet, and sense of belonging that Durham provides. I value the opportunity to actively and individually contribute to my hometown, not existing merely as one among the masses. These qualities are not incidental—they are foundational.

The proposal before you conflicts not only with our planning documents but also with widely accepted principles of human-scale design—principles grounded in street width, pedestrian experience, and access to light and sky. These are not abstract concerns; they directly shape quality of life.

Many have spoken about wanting a downtown that residents, even people from other towns, will be drawn to and patronize. I would love to have a thoughtfully redeveloped downtown that retains some of Durham's small town New England character. That is what our Master Plan calls for. That is what our Architectural Design Standards call for. That is what the Purpose Statement in our Zoning Ordinance Purpose Statement for Central Business District calls for. **Why is the PB ignoring all the community-supported guidance?**

We need a process that genuinely incorporates differing perspectives and seeks compromise. Effective planning requires time, openness, and a willingness to question assumptions. It requires collaboration—not polarization.

Please pause and reflect. Consider the long history of thoughtful stewardship in this town and the many voices—planners, architects, long-time residents—urging caution and balance.

Consider what Dennis Meadows and the Carrolls have told you, the actions of Dudley Dudley and Nancy Sandberg, the Milnes and those who preserved their legacy by Mill Pond, and others who have lived here even longer than I, who have given of themselves to keep Durham distinctive and special. Don't toss aside the pleas of my fellow citizen warriors – Beth Olshansky, Robin Mower, Joshua Meyrowitz, Judith Spang, Gail Kelley and urban renewal expert Dick Gsottschneider, to name a few. Listen to former UNH Campus Planner and Architect Doug Benck's expertise.

We are not asking you to halt progress. We are pleading that you not obliterate Durham's special character in an effort to meet worthwhile goals that won't be met by the approaches being proposed. We are asking you to guide our town, our community, our home, responsibly so that Durham can grow and thrive without losing the character that makes it worth preserving.

Thank you.

Deborah Hirsch Mayer

19 Garden Lane