

An Alternative to the Current Proposal

**To Eliminate 3-Story Limit and Allow Four- and
Five-Story Buildings Along Main Street**

There is a Better Way to Meet Our Town Goals

**Presented to the Town Council by Beth Olshansky
on August 4, 2025**

Goals

- Goal of Housing Task Force: Create more housing
- Goals of Town Council: Revitalize downtown and broaden the tax base.
- Aspirations of the community: Create an attractive downtown that retains its “small town character.”

How do we know what the community wants?

The Master Plan Survey tells us...

86% of respondents want our downtown to retain its small town New England character.

Why are Main Streets Important?

“Main Streets are like the spine of every vital urban centre.”

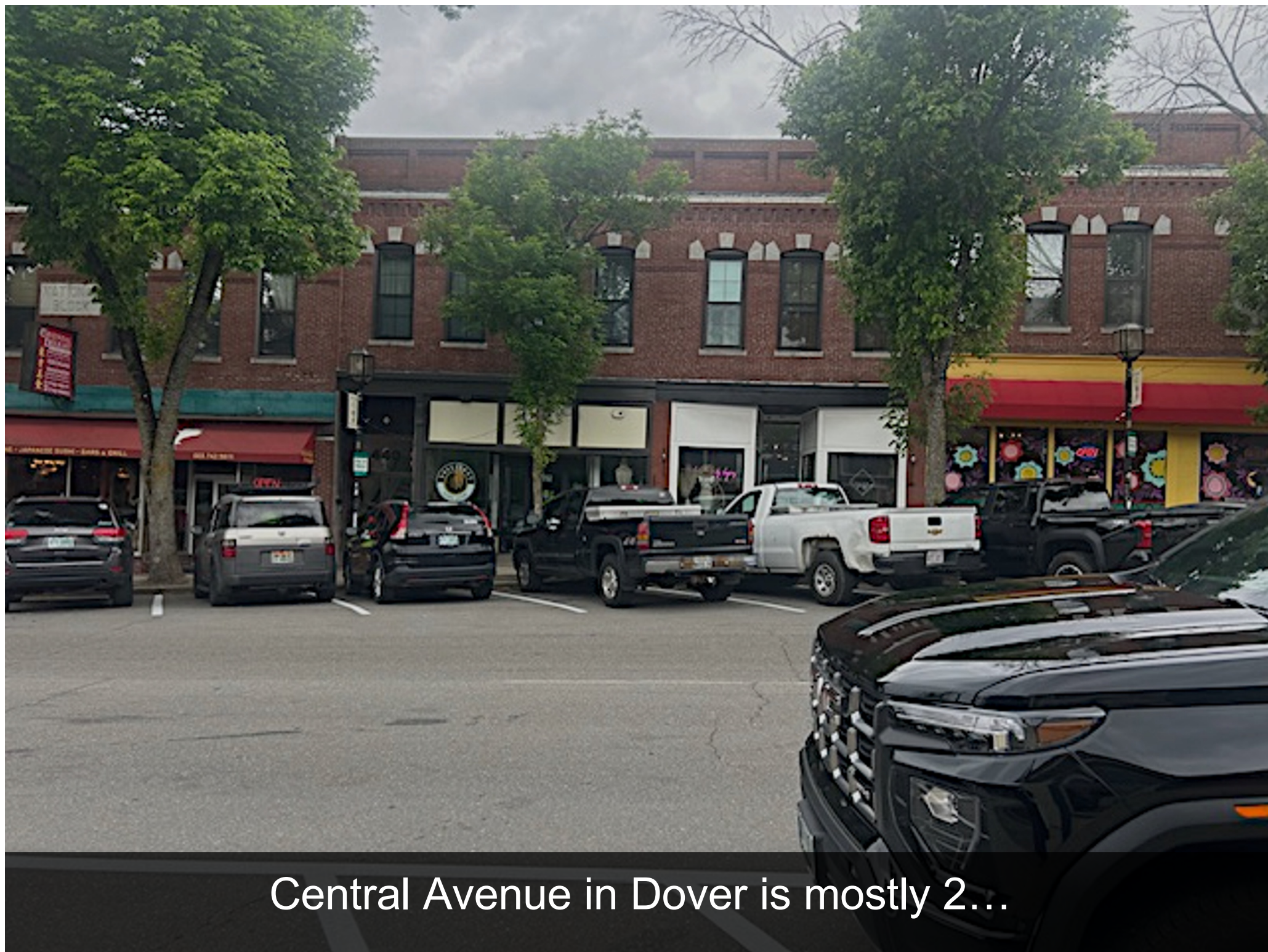
— Mary Rowe, Canadian Urban Institute

Main Streets are at the heart of our community.
They define our community character. They either
attract people to a downtown, or they don't.

***What can we learn from our
neighboring communities?***

Tour of Building Heights and Rooflines of Main Streets in Nearby Communities

Dover



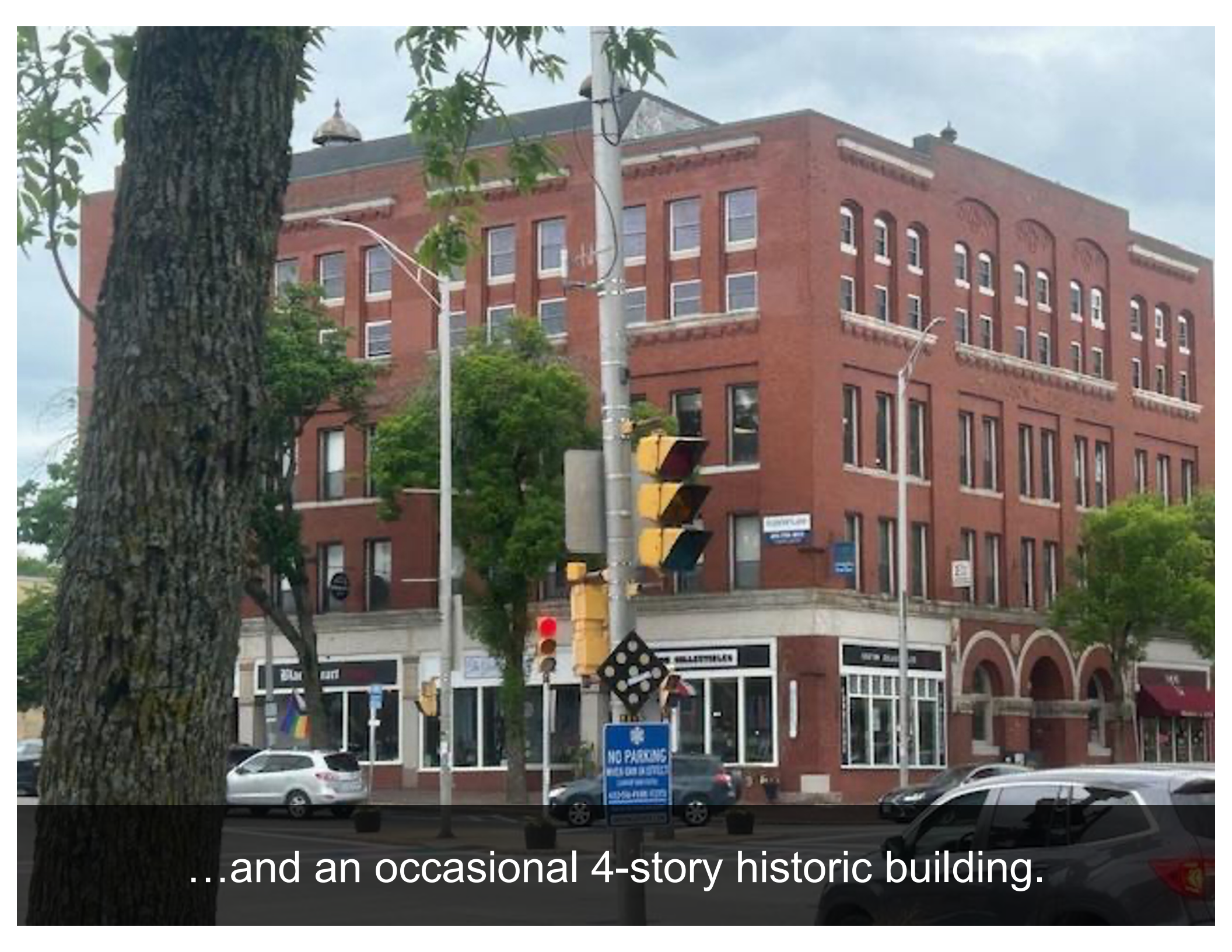
Central Avenue in Dover is mostly 2...



... and 2 1/2-story buildings. Note the dormers on a gable roof offer 3 floors of space while reducing mass.



There are a few 3-story buildings with historic “bones” ...



...and an occasional 4-story historic building.

Tall buildings, tucked
along side streets, not
seen from Central Ave.
Gable rooflines add a
more pleasing design
element than a flat
roof.





Recent construction: 5 stories along a side street (not “human scale”)

Dover: What you are not seeing along Central Ave. is a wall of 4- and 5-story buildings — or any 5-story buildings along their main street, for that matter.

Newmarket



Newmarket's business district is similar in size to Durham – both primarily running along their Main Streets.



2 1/2-story buildings, with an occasional 3 1/2-story building, provide a “human scale” streetscape.



Adjacent buildings are no more than 1 story in height variation.



Even this mill building is only 3 stories above ground level.

Newmarket: Here, again, what you are not seeing along Main Street is a wall of 4- and 5-story buildings—or *any* 4- or 5-story buildings, for that matter.

Exeter



Water Street, Exeter's Main Street...



... is a mix of mostly 2, 2 1/2 and 3 stories: Small variations in height create a visually cohesive human scale streetscape.



Compare 4 stories (left) vs. 3 1/2 stories with dormer (right): Same rentable space. Which is more attractive and feels less imposing?

Exeter: What you are not seeing along Water Street is a wall of 4- and 5-story buildings — or any 5-story buildings, for that matter.

Portsmouth



Congress Street has mostly 3- with some 4-story buildings.



Newer construction uses 1/2 stories (top floor with dormers and slanted rooflines) to mitigate the height while providing an extra floor of rental space and maintaining the traditional New England vernacular.



Market Street: Note the comfortable 3-story “human scale.”



Bow Street: Taller buildings mitigate height and mass with top floor dormers (i.e. $\frac{1}{2}$ stories), providing that additional story of rental space.

Portsmouth: Predominantly 3 stories. Most taller buildings have a top story with a slanted roof and dormers to maintain a sense of human scale while achieving additional floor space. What you are not seeing in this urban business district is a wall of 4- and 5-story buildings.

Observations

- **The main streets in 4 nearby communities are a mix of mostly 2, 2 1/2 and 3 stories, with a few 3 1/2- or 4 1/2-story buildings.**
- **The attractive taller buildings share common design features such as dormers on a slanted or gable roof to mitigate height and mass.**
- **Heights do not vary more than 1- 1½ stories to maintain continuity of streetscape.**
- **Five-story buildings are the exception, even in larger urban downtowns such as Portsmouth.**

Durham's Master Plan

The Vision Statement of our Durham's Master Plan's Downtown Chapter states:

"The Town seeks to shape development, particularly in the Central Business District, through design standards intended to enhance the quality and appearance of development.

*The downtown will have a **human scale* of primarily two and three, and under special circumstances, four-story buildings.**"*

* Human scale is a mathematical calculation that takes into consideration width of the road, width of the sidewalk and building setbacks. In Durham, along Main St., human scale is 30 ft to eave-line according to architect Doug Bencks,

Durham's Master Plan was created through the participation of 90 Durham residents during a daylong visioning forum and a survey completed by 467 residents, followed by years of participation in public hearings. Grown out of community consensus, it lays out a vision for our future. Zoning ordinances should be aligned with a community's Master Plan.

Durham Architectural Design Standards

Purpose of Architectural Design Standards (excerpts)

- 1) Provide for high-quality, human-scale architecture that conforms with generally accepted traditional design principles and is sensitive to neighboring buildings, streetscapes, the broader setting...**
- 2) Encourage design which is compatible with the architectural heritage of Durham, New Hampshire, and New England;**
- 3) Strengthen commercial vitality and promote the downtown as a welcoming, pedestrian and bicyclist-oriented destination, while maintaining the feel of a small town that is important to Durham residents.**

Durham Architectural Design Standards (Excerpts)

Scale and Massing

- 1) Human scale. Buildings *shall above all* possess a human scale, both in terms of their overall size and in their details and materials, in order to promote a sense of pedestrian friendliness.

Note use of the word “shall” in our design standards.

Durham Architectural Design Standards

(Excerpts)

2) **Maximum height and criteria for taller buildings.**

On the other hand, buildings shall not be so tall as to create a canyon effect and be *out of scale with the human form and surrounding buildings.* With the tallest buildings, it may be desirable to employ techniques to reduce the sense of height.

Note use of the word “shall” in our design standards.

Durham Architectural Design Standards

(Excerpts)

Variation in heights. Some variation in building height within a block is desirable to help break up the *mass* of the block and to create variety and interest; generally, however, *there shall not be more than a one- or 1-1/2 story difference in height between adjacent buildings* in order to maintain continuity along the streetscape. This limitation does not apply when the adjacent building is one story.

Note use of the word “shall” in our design standards.

Example of inappropriate scale.



2½ stories adjacent to 5 stories...



...jarringly out-of-scale on both sides.



Another project clearly out-of-scale.
(This is why placing oversized buildings mid-block is discouraged.)

Why are 5-story buildings along Main St. a bad idea?

(THEY VIOLATE OUR PLANNING DOCUMENTS.)

- 1. Master Plan refers to “human scale,” particularly key along our mere 1 1/4-long block Main Street.**
- 2. Architectural Standards prohibit more than a 1 1/2-story height difference between adjacent buildings.**
- 3. Architectural Design Standards call for “human-scale architecture...and are sensitive to neighboring buildings, streetscapes...”**

Why are 5-story buildings along part of Main Street a bad idea? More reasons.

- **They run counter to generally accepted architectural practices as evidenced in neighboring communities (as referenced in our Architectural Design Standards).**
- **This proposal represents a breach of community trust, given the vision stated in our Master Plan for 2-, 3- and an occasional 4-story building.**

Additionally...CU must meet all 8 criteria.

Five stories along that stretch of Main St. will not meet Conditional Use Criterion #4.

CU #4. Character of the buildings and structures: The design of any new buildings or structures and the modification of existing buildings or structures on the site **shall not be incompatible with the established character of the neighborhood. This shall include, but not be limited to, the scale, height, and massing** of the building or structure, the roof line, the architectural treatment of the front or street elevation, the location of the principal entrance, and the material and colors proposed to be used.

Let's take a look...

***Where would a 5-story building work along our Main St.?
Here, next to the newly renovated 2½-story Juicery?***





Superimposed 5-story building next to Juicery. While this may look exaggerated, the windows do line up.



A less massive 5-story building still towers over Juicery. It does not meet our Design Standards re: height differences and compatibility with adjacent buildings and streetscape.



***Here, next to our historic Young's building
(referred to as a “legacy building” by MB)?***





Would you want to see 5-story buildings here . . .



... creating a canyon effect along narrow Jenkins Court?



**Even allowing 4 stories BY RIGHT could be problematic.
*Is this what we want to see along Main Street BY RIGHT?***

This design meets our architectural design standards!



As did this...

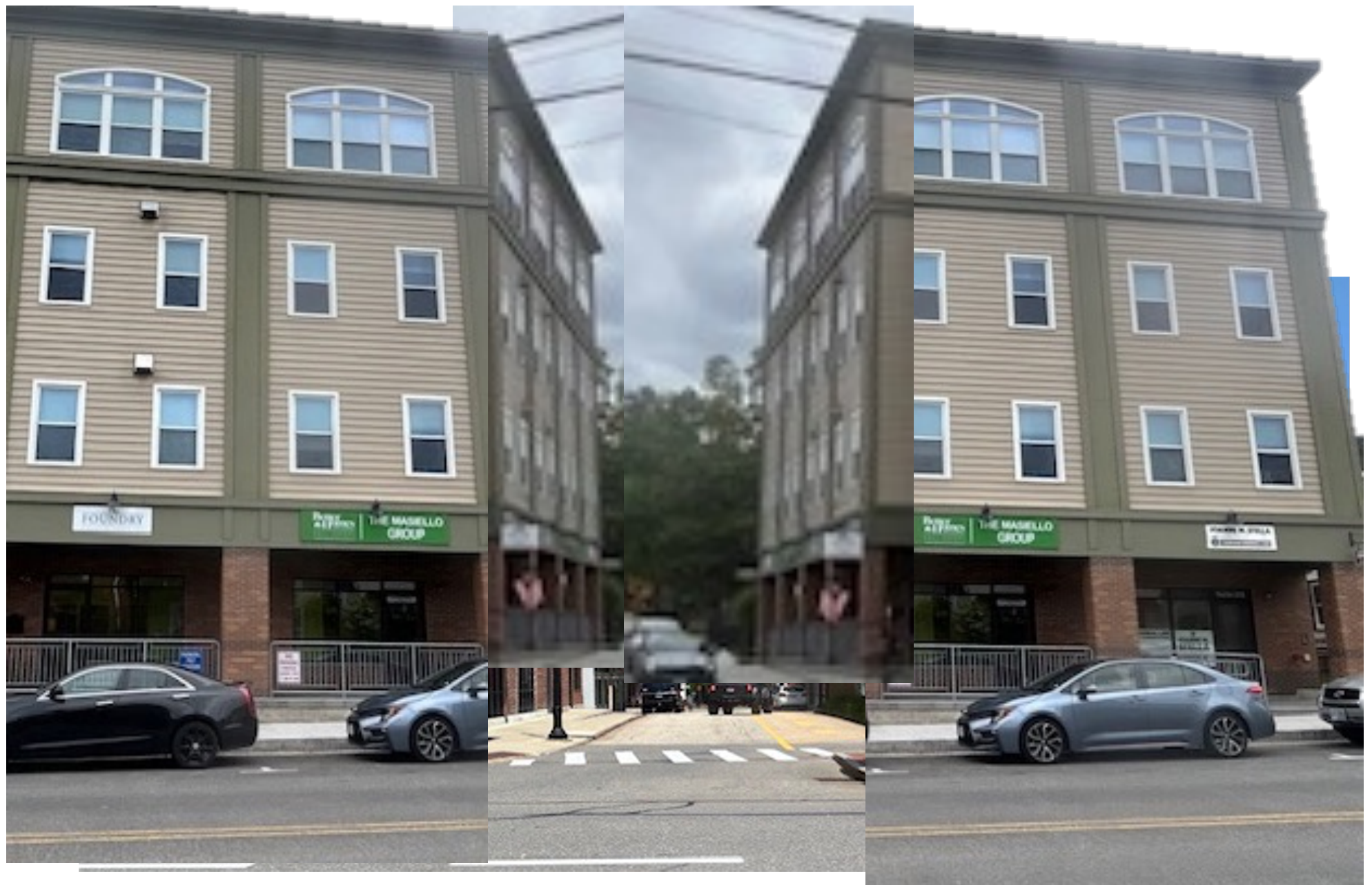
If we zone for 4 stories BY RIGHT, this is what we may end up with along our Main Street. It meets our current design standards!

How would Main Street look lined with 4-story buildings?





These 4-story buildings with flat roofs meet our design standards. At the corner of Main and Jenkins, the scale is too large for narrow Jenkin's Court.



Imagine 4-story 9-11 Madbury Road at this corner of Main and Jenkins.

**“3 1/2 stories is a building-scale tipping point.
There are many examples of vibrant and
attractive 5-story downtowns around New
England, but they feel more urban and less like a
small town downtown.”**

**— Durham resident Doug Bencks,
former UNH Campus Architect,
architect for the Durham Public Library**

Why is this important?

Our Master Plan Survey states:

86% of respondents want our Downtown to retain its small town New England character.

This superimposed 3½-story building next to Juicery is more visually compatible while still providing an extra story of rental space.



Another superimposed 3½-story building next to The Juicery demonstrates that 3 ½ stories is more visually compatible while still providing additional floor of rental space.



Key Recommendations, Step 1

- 1. Recognize Main Street as an architecturally sensitive location, i.e., “the face of our community.” An attractive Main Street will draw businesses and people to it, serving to revitalize our downtown.**
- 1. Recognize our ability to zone different parts of Main Street for different heights (as has been done in the past).**

Key Recommendations, Step 2

3. Zone for 3 1/2 stories along Main Street where we currently have a 3-story limit to allow for an extra floor of residential space.

4. Zone for 3 1/2 stories along Main Street, instead of 4, to mitigate increased height, reduce front-facing mass and require more architecturally pleasing rooflines.

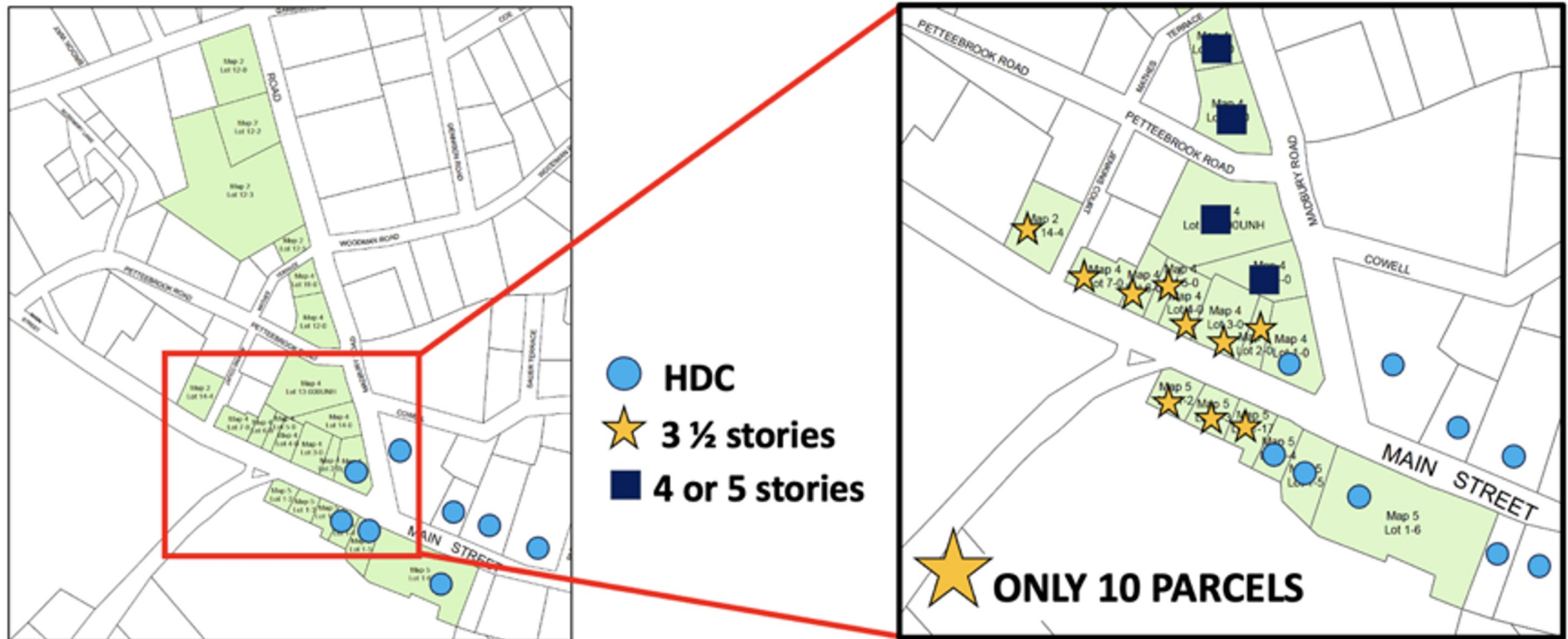
What about the tax revenue?

“This 3 ½ story building provides virtually the same usable areas as a building with a full 4th floor.”

- Doug Bencks



Proposed 3 1/2-story limit on Main Street adjacent to the Historic District

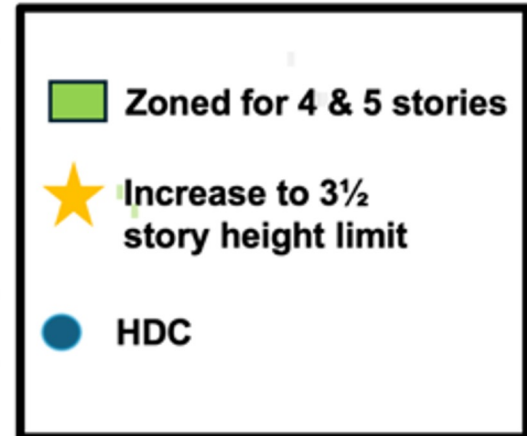
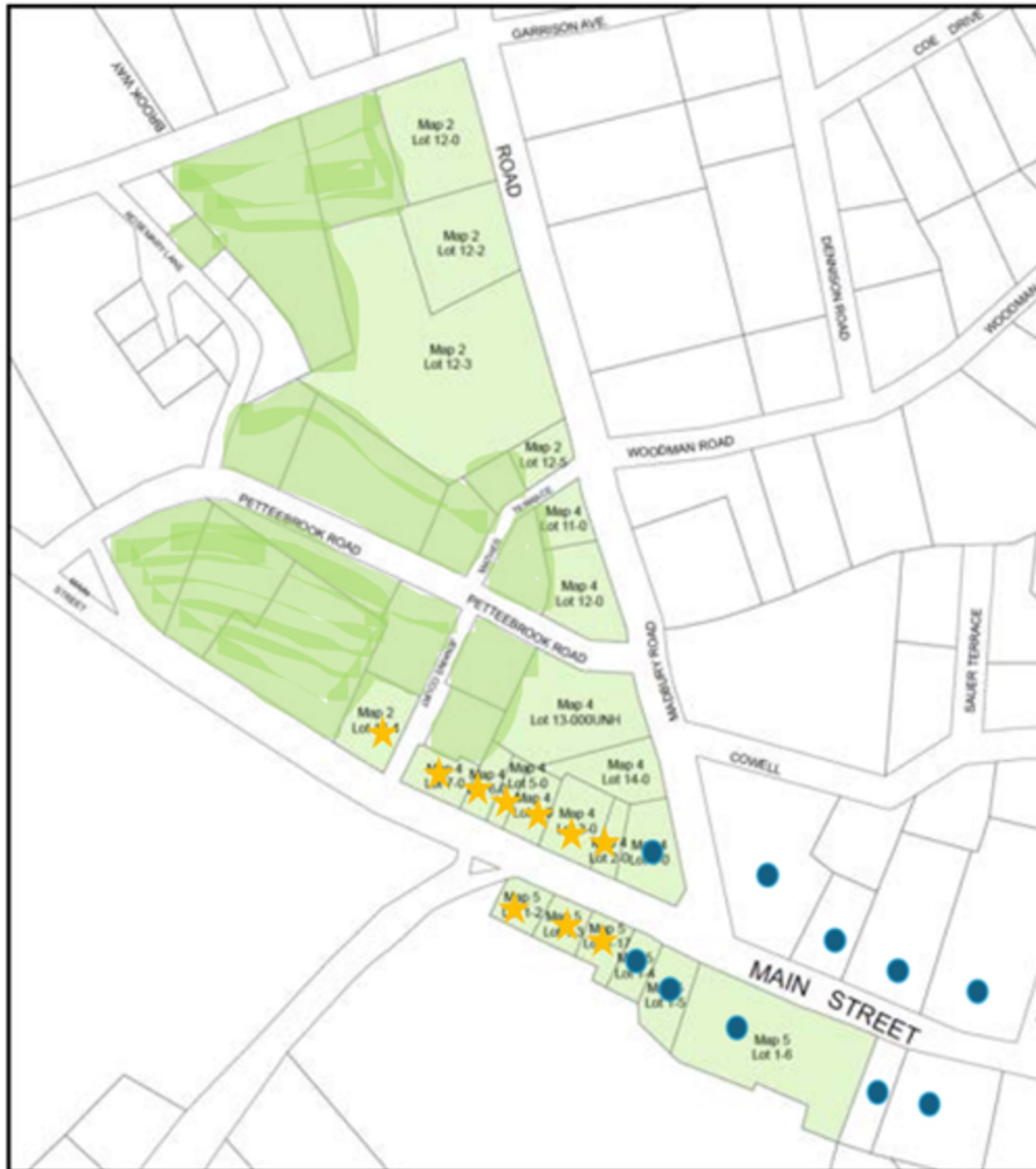


Current zoning 3-story limit in green

Proposed 3 1/2-story limit

Of the 10 starred lots, 3 or 4 will not likely be redeveloped: Pauly's Pocket, Libby's, The Juicery, and possibly the iconic Young's building. Thus, this request only impacts 6 or 7 lots in all of CB1.

The Big Picture



We urge the Town Council to vote down the current proposal. Instead, adopt a height ordinance for that small portion of Main St. (from T&C to Madbury Road) that increases the 3-story limit to 3½-stories in order to:

- ★ **incentivize redevelopment of underdeveloped Main St.**
- ★ **add an additional floor of rental space i.e. housing units**
- ★ **bring more residents downtown to support local businesses by creating an inviting human scale Main Street.**

- ★ **expand the tax base in a community-acceptable way**
- ★ **respect existing community vision as stated in our Durham Master Plan, our Zoning Ordinance, and our Architectural Design Standards**
- ★ **create an aesthetically pleasing, architecturally appropriate downtown where our community would want to gather.**

Vote **NO** on the proposal before you.

Durham deserves redevelopment that reflects the community's vision while advancing Town Council Goals. We CAN have both!