

DRAFT MINUTES/NOTES
Durham Housing Task Force

August 12, 2024

10:00 am – Council Chambers

Housing Task Force Members Present

Sally Tobias, chair
Heather Grant (joins late)
Michael Mulhern (“Michael M”) on Zoom
Michael Saputo (“Michael S”)
Judith Spang

Others Present

Michael Behrendt, Town Planner (“Michael B”)
Taylor Cray, Workforce Housing Coalition

Members of the Public

None

Presenters

Todd Selig, Town Administrator

Call to Order 10:02am

No quorum for the meeting as we need to have five people in Council Chambers. The task force continued to hold an informal meeting but no decisions were made.

Public Comments

None

Reports from Committee Members and Advisors

No committee members present

Discussion with Todd Selig, Town Administrator

Friday Updates: Over 4,000 people are subscribed. Open rate is over 50% each week. Goal of updates is to keep everyone in the community abreast of happenings. Aiming for succinct updates, but some topics require more explanation. Housing updates have been helpful, a recent submission was debated because it didn’t provide a standalone, clear description of the issue. For people who don’t open the emails every week, we need a little background with each housing blurb. In addition, because housing is a contentious issue, we want to strive to be balanced in our presentation of what’s been happening behind the scenes.

Michael S: Based on the conversation that was had around the Durham Friday Updates, it seems worth considering what the purpose of our outreach is. Is outreach the responsibility of the Housing Task Force?

Sally: Starting conversations around housing and sharing information is our role, and receiving feedback from people in town is important.

Michael B: There is some gray area between advocacy and education, but most town boards participate in some form of advocacy. Most members of the task force would have a hard time educating people without advocating for the cause they believe in. The messages we personally convey are up to us.

Judith: The Durham Friday Updates piece was simple and objective, which was great. The Task Force should stick to stating the facts, and at times the facts will support specific political action, but it's safest to stick to the facts. So what will our position be at the Planning Board hearing?

Sally: Our position will be to support it to create more viable housing opportunities. Conversation will be continued after Todd's second agenda item is covered.

10:25 Heather Grant joins. (Still do not have quorum since only four people in Council Chambers.)

Downtown Vibrancy and Housing (Todd): To align with Smart Growth principles, housing should be focused in the downtown area. Business operations downtown face challenges with the seasonality of the student population. A few factors made matters worse for these businesses: mail order shopping, COVID and the resulting trend toward remote work, and decreasing student enrollment. We now have a lot of vacancies and the focus of new businesses is alcohol and vape products, rather than businesses that may be of interest to families. It's worth looking at changing the height restrictions to allow developers to increase density.

Judith: One thought that comes to mind is whether we can really make a significant difference in the population downtown with zoning changes.

Todd: I believe there's significant potential with all of the single story buildings and Mill Plaza, which is 10 acres.

Heather: There is a committee of the Planning Board looking at the possibilities for downtown. Changes were made to the zoning code 4 or 5 years ago to promote development downtown, and so far nothing has happened. That tells us those changes weren't viable and it's time to revise the zoning code again. There are some things beyond the planning board's purview that could encourage more people to live downtown, like parking permits for residents who live above shops.

Sally: Mill Plaza needs to be zoned for development separately from other areas.

Heather: That lot is certainly sensitive and should be handled differently from the rest of downtown.

Judith: The outcome of Mill Plaza is exactly what it should have been. The developer was trying to do something that was not beneficial to the town, and the development was stopped. We need to ensure that we get what we want when developers come into the picture.

Sally: An overlay downtown would allow us to get what we want.

Michael M: Regarding parking, it's going to be a limitation as we strive to increase density. The town needs to provide more parking, or a parking plan of some kind in order to make this possible.

Question is raised about how to prevent development downtown from filling with UNH students. The point is made that we would then ask questions about whether it would be a problem for students to live downtown, and if so, what can be added to the zoning code to increase the diversity of renters downtown.

Todd: Infrastructure requirements are a valid concern. There are two options when trying to offset infrastructure costs to incentivize development. Either the town (taxpayers) take care of infrastructure improvements, and the developer gets a break on them, or the developer is allowed a certain amount of density and in exchange they are responsible for infrastructure costs. It's worth it to continue to discuss these options.

In the coming weeks Todd and Michael B plan to meet with Torrington Properties – owner of Mill Plaza.

Parking is a valid concern. Todd lists a few areas where parking is available or could become available if the Town decides to reduce the number of spaces being leased to UNH students. UNH has also seen reduced parking in certain lots, it may be possible to partner with them to better utilize certain lots – for example, West Edge.

Regarding students in new rental housing, Todd believes we should let the market play out. We're already seeing decreased demand as enrollment and on-campus living requirements at UNH change.

Sally/Heather: any research into the downtown area should be coordinated with the planning board to avoid redundancy.

Michael B: One distinction that should be made: the overlay developed for the outer edges of town is for workforce and affordable housing, the analysis of and potential overlay developed for downtown should be for housing generally – of all price points. Developing workforce housing downtown would be very challenging.

Todd: Reiterates that the downtown area and businesses are suffering and something needs to be done to shift the direction we're moving.

Michael B: One thing we could do is invite downtown store owners to a Housing Task Force meeting.

Proposed Workforce Housing Ordinance

Sally explains the history of the ordinance and status of Planning Board public hearings.

Judith: The language around the types of housing is vague (single family vs. multi-family). Instead of "may," "shall" would be a better word.

Heather: There's confusion about the distinction between a single-family house on a single lot vs. a development of cottage-style single family homes on a single lot.

Clarification that sales of individual units will not be permitted.

Discussion of potential for an owner/developer to subdivide a larger lot and only develop a portion as workforce housing.

Public Question:

Ken Stuff, resident of Faculty neighborhood: What is the zoning ordinance trying to solve? What are the considerations for public schools? The impact on public schools could be significant.

Recommendation that the presentations about school impact and the presentation from the superintendent be reviewed.

Explanation of impetus for workforce housing ordinance.

Outreach Initiative

Review of presentations completed to date. Conversation has been well-received. Overall, the response from commissions and committees has been uplifting – this was a great way to reach people from across town who don't typically come to public hearings. Support for increased density and increased housing overall. Conversations were robust and people seemed interested in trying to solve housing issues. Sally plans to add a slide about downtown development, prompted by Todd Selig's interest in revitalizing downtown.

Announcements from NH Workforce Housing Coalition – walking tour coming up.

Meeting adjourns.

Respectfully submitted.
Eileen Murphy