

October 11, 2017

Re: Riverwoods

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board,

Like many other residents in town, I too was excited to hear that Riverwoods wanted to build a facility in Durham. They come with a stellar reputation. I know many people who live at Riverwoods Exeter who are happy to be there. I had assumed the two facilities would be similar. Over the past months, I have learned the two have little in common. Throughout the Planning Board process, I have growing disappointments with the proposed Durham Riverwoods project.

Clear-Cutting the Site, Building to the Edges, Pushing Height Limits

We, in Durham, are all too familiar with developers coming into town, clear-cutting a site, and building out to its very edges, all the while pushing our height regulations and wetlands buffers. Based on Riverwoods' spacious Exeter facility nestled in the woods and their non-profit status, myself and others in the community expected so much more from the project than Durham will actually be getting.

Durham Proposal Comes Up Short

Riverwoods Exeter has such a wonderful reputation. When you visit the site, you can see why. The Woods, for instance, offers a modest 2 to 2½-story residential building that offers a welcoming, non-institutional architectural design. The facility is nestled in the woods among extensive walking trails. Beside the pleasant, low-key look of the building, there is the issue of amenities. We all know that it is important for seniors to keep moving to stay healthy. Exeter's extensive trail system and swimming pool offer these important amenities where the Durham site comes up short with no pool, walking trails only 1/3 of a mile long, and no safe way for pedestrians to walk to town or the library. Promises to bus residents to the UNH indoor pool are not well thought out as the water temperature at that pool runs on the cool side for young athletes and will not be attractive to most seniors.

Massive Institutional-Looking Building Designed like a Hotel

One of Durham's local architects commented that the building is designed like a large hotel. Though not the purview of the PB, the interior space looks and functions very much like a hotel, with long narrow windowless corridors lined with doors and without little nooks for residents to sit and visit with one another. The design of a hotel presumes little or no interaction among those who stay there. Riverwoods should be designed to support interaction and socialization, another key element important to keeping seniors healthy and engaged. Like many hotels, it is sandwiched between two major state highways with little vegetative buffer.

Gateway Issues

Whether or not one is proud of the building, as Riverwoods stated it is, or offended by its massive size and institutional look, there is no doubt that it will define our Rt. 108 gateway. While the "drive-by 3-D model" offered various views, one does wonder what this imposing structure will actually look like from Rt. 108, Rt. 4, and the Rt. 4 exit ramp. It's tough to conceal

or even semi-screen such an enormous 5-story building built out to the setbacks. I have been told by the Riverwoods Team that the relatively modest plantings will look a lot better in 25 years. Whom of its founding members will live to benefit from this? I worry about the experience of residents living there. Wouldn't leaving more of those majestic trees from the existing historic forest and adding more intensive landscaping help to screen the sounds and views of traffic?

Will the PILOT be fair to Durham?

Watching the Town Council Roundtable on October 2, I learned about the projected tax burden Durham will be facing in the future. I also learned that Riverwoods does not want the same PILOT arrangement they have with Exeter, where they pay the equivalent of full taxes. For the Durham campus, they want to pay approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ of the taxes. Given the projected tax increases and that this one of our few remaining parcels dedicated to commercial development, I am disappointed that Riverwoods wants to contribute so little.

Who is Paying for Water and Sewer Hook-Up?

Since early in the design review process, Riverwoods has stated they would pay for water and sewer hook-up. Now Riverwoods has asked the Town to pay for the water and sewer hook-up. Here is another area where the benefits to the Town seem to be much less than way we expected.

How Does the Ambitious Approval Schedule Interface with Finalizing the PILOT?

In my opinion, the PB has gone above and beyond to try to accommodate Riverwoods ambitious timeline. I am concerned that they may be asking for PB approval *before* the PILOT has been finalized. *This would not be a wise move for the Town.* We heard on Monday night at the Town Council that the Town has not yet finalized its decision regarding the land swap and that may well rest on how the PILOT negotiations play out. Without the land swap, the plan will be forced to change. I would hope that the PB doesn't vote on this project prematurely, putting the Town at a disadvantage in its PILOT and land swap negotiations.

The PB Does Have Discretion

The one area where the PB does have discretion in its approval process is regarding whether to approve a building beyond the standard 50' height limit (marked by only half-way up the roofline).

What should that discretion depend upon? It should depend upon the relative benefit to the community as a whole. Taxes will not be one of those benefits. Nor may paying for water and sewer lines. And while community members were initially enthusiastic about the concept of Riverwoods coming to Durham, I know several "founding members" who are seriously considering pulling out because this facility as designed is not a place they want to live. Yes, the facility will provide a place for seniors to live, but it is not the Riverwoods Exeter many of us had hoped for. Bigger is not necessarily better.

Given the many shortcomings, I urge the PB to insist on the 50' height limit and reject the request for additional pavement on this already packed site. The site is already overbuilt. By honoring the 50' limit, the building (which sits atop a hill and remains very exposed to Rt. 108),

will appear less massive and less imposing along our gateway. As I have stated before, more landscaping would also be helpful. Given the choices Riverwoods has made to clear-cut a old-growth forest and buildout to the allowable edges of the site, I believe a 50' height limit is appropriate, and preferable to tone down the look and feel of the facility.

I hope the PB will weigh carefully benefits and drawbacks to the community before voting on these discretionary matters. I urge the PB to deny height beyond the 50' and the request for additional pavement.

Regards,

Beth Olshansky