

June 26, 2020

Re: Mill Plaza Redevelopment Project

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board,

In the heat of the summer and in the midst of a pandemic, I thank you for your tireless service. I also do not envy your position as you weigh the impacts, positive and negative, of a very large Conditional Use project in the center of our downtown.

I'm afraid when I offer comments on Zoom, I am not as articulate as I would like to be. I often forget half of what I want to say. Such was the case last Wednesday. In my plea for hiring an independent consultant to undertake a fiscal impact analysis, I forgot a few key points:

In our CU criteria, there are actually two items that address fiscal matters: One has to do with impact on property values of adjacent properties. The second has to do with fiscal impacts on the Town. I quote: "The Planning Board's decision shall be based upon an analysis of the fiscal impact of the project on the town. The Planning Board may commission, at the applicant's expense, an independent analysis of the fiscal impact of the project on the town."

Why is this so critical at this particular time and under these specific circumstances? After years of delays, this project now comes before you at a time of major economic upheaval and data-driven forecasts on significant declines in college-age populations. By the time this project would be completed (should it be approved), I hope we will have a vaccine and social distancing will no longer be an issue. Still, UNH just announced a \$30 million deficit as a result of the pandemic. Once a vaccine is available, you can well imagine UNH requiring as many students as possible to fill their dormitory spaces.

This will only exacerbate the issues Durham faces with coming Enrollment Cliff. We know we can expect at least a 25% decrease in student population beginning in 2026. That figure, based on birth rates alone, does not consider the economic upheaval our country is experiencing and the high costs of college tuition. As planners for the Town, one can't ignore these realities given that our "low hanging fruit" has always been student housing and we are near, if not passed, capacity.

I am concerned about some of the large student housing complexes partially emptying of students and the likelihood of families moving in. As was mentioned by one Board member, student housing brings in higher tax revenue than multi-unit residential housing, thus assessments will decline.

The larger issue is that as a community, we need to know how that likelihood of surplus student housing transitioning to family housing impacts the overall fiscal health of the town. This speaks directly to the CU Criteria regarding fiscal impacts *on the Town*. While the CDA boasts of adding over \$600,000 in tax revenue to the Town coffers, how many additional school-age children

moving into former student housing will it take to negate that figure or eliminate any financial gains from revenue generated? And in the meantime, we have placed serious negative quality of life and environmental impacts on a much valued intown neighborhood.

None of us have a crystal ball, but when weighing the CU Criteria, I would hope the PB does not enter into a decision blindly, without considering likely impacts on the community, including the fiscal impacts on the entire town, as required by our regulations. Because of a congruence of many circumstances, the decision before you is complex project whose impact goes well beyond its 10 acres. I should think the PB would want as many data points as possible to insure the future fiscal well-being of the Town. Please help our community *plan for the future* by hiring two independent consultants: an independent appraiser for impacts to adjacent property values and an independent consultant to evaluate likely fiscal impacts on the town given the unusual circumstances that confront us. All this information will be necessary to do due diligence when addressing the CU Criteria. It is unfair to rely solely on the developer's hired consultants for this information.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Beth Olshansky
122 Packers Falls Road