

Re: Mill Plaza Redevelopment Plan

August 3, 2020

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board,

I respectfully submit this follow-up letter to my comments of July 22, many of which I was not able to share due to the five-minute time limit. This letter covers several areas:

- The Big Picture
- Decision on Fiscal and Economic Impact Studies
- “Increased Natural Buffer” per Settlement Agreement
- Increased Parking
- Architectural Design

Time to Consider the Big Picture

The PB has received several important letters recently, among them from Dennis Meadows, Jennifer Pribble, and Robin Mower. Each letter offered an invitation to step back and look at the big picture. As Heather Grant remarked, as we are moved from agenda item to agenda item over many months, it is easy to lose sight of the whole project, how the parts fit together, and how the whole project will impact our community.

Dennis’ letter reminds us that the decision to build or not build has serious long-term impacts, given this particular moment in time. Our crumbling national and international economy and a university system on very shaky enrollment and financial grounds point to an unprecedented future. The pending enrollment cliff and far-reaching impacts of COVID-19 on the US and international economy should give us pause. We are experiencing a perfect storm. We might want to believe it will all be over soon. As Dennis points out, assumptions from the past no longer apply.

For those who are not aware, Dennis Meadows is an internationally recognized systems thinker who was included among one of the top 10 Futurists in the World in the Encyclopedia of the Future. His books have been translated into 35 languages. He has won numerous awards around the globe. Bottom line: the man is brilliant. His letter should not be shrugged off as just another citizen opinion.

Decision on Fiscal and Economic Impact Studies

I am dismayed that the PB has been guided not to move forward with a town-wide analysis of fiscal and economic impacts of building an overstock of student housing.

Given the tenuous nature of the economy and the University, the pending enrollment cliff, and loss of international students, why wouldn’t Board members want an independent expert to look at the potential impacts of building an overstock of student housing? And also at what impacts our town will face as we try to transition student housing to workforce and family housing?

Councilor Lawson mentioned the reduction in assessed value should student housing complexes be forced to rent to non-students at lower rents. Should families with children begin filling our large student housing projects to the west of campus, there would also be the taxpayer costs of sending those children to ORCSD to consider. If I were on the Board, I would want to make sure my vote was grounded in as accurate projections as possible -- not just a best-case scenario. What has been submitted to date is inadequate.

While I was relieved to hear that CDA is rethinking the interior design and layout of number of beds per unit (i.e. reconsidering the 4 bed apartment option), I do not believe that the CDA project will ever risk becoming anything other than student housing. Students want to live downtown. As I register students each year who live out of town, this is what they tell me. What concerns me more is the likely emptying out of the projects west of town and transitioning to other forms of housing once we allow an overstock of student housing. *Why wouldn't the PB want to be very sure that this eventuality will not cost the Town and therefore citizens more in services than the CDA project promises to raise in tax revenue?*

We know there will be negative quality-of-life impacts on the adjacent Faculty Road neighborhood if student housing is placed adjacent to it. That is inevitable. But we have the opportunity to make sure this project will not also increase costs to all Durham taxpayers. I would think members of the Board would want to be assured by an independent reviewer that their vote will not further burden the town during this economically shaky time which promises to last for quite some time.

“Increased Natural Buffer”

I recently re-watched the January 22 meeting. A few things jumped out at me: The “increased natural buffer along the southern property line adjacent to the College Brook” required by the Settlement Agreement is nowhere near what the original Settlement renderings promised, and in fact included some of the parking islands as part of the buffer calculation. Those should not be included to justify what is actually an attempt to ignore the spirit and intent of the Agreement. I notice that CDA chooses to ignore “spirit and intent” when it serves their purposes but uses it to justify other decisions such as whether or not North means true North. Can one have it both ways? Only if members allow it.

Increased Parking – An Opportunity Not to be Overlooked

On January 22, CDA stated that they had 424 parking spaces (not including the Toomerfs property on Church Hill), which was 80 spaces more than is required by the Settlement Agreement which states that parking “shall be increased from the existing 345 spaces to a number acceptable to the Planning Board.” The Settlement requires more than the existing 345 spaces. The July presentation stated there are now 411 spaces.

At 346 spaces (an increase “to the letter,” analogous to interpretation of “increased buffer”), the current plan has 65 spaces more than is required by the Settlement.

Given concerns about traffic safety and the inevitable flow of student vehicles in and out of the site (whether or not they are allowed to park, they will pick up and drop off friends, for example), herein lies a tremendous opportunity for the PB to push for amenities that would clearly benefit the Town:

- 1) a true increased buffer along the *entire* brook with a walking path within a natural setting
- 2) an abundantly landscaped parking lot and buildings with many more trees and plantings than currently on the plan
- 3) parking islands that are actually large enough to sustain the growth of healthy, attractive trees. Note: according to Joshua Meyrowitz, the current plan's parking islands proposed at 6 feet are 4 feet smaller than what exists. That is unacceptable.
- 4) larger sidewalks in front of Hannaford and the other retail spaces so as to allow for outdoor seating, and
- 5) additional green space that can serve as community gathering places.

As Jen Pribble's letter points out, more community space would contribute greatly to the vitality of the project and our community. As a Conditional Use project, the PB could ask for increased amenities.

Architectural Design Considerations

It should be clear that a community that has 37 pages of architectural regulations takes seriously and values the design of its buildings. Past major projects, such as Madbury Commons and Orion, have taken months of architectural review to insure handsome downtown projects. In addition, those projects only look as good as they do because members of the community, including Todd Selig, stepped up to help advise the applicants.

There is no way that the current plan meets our Architectural Design Standards. (Note these are not guidelines but Standards that *shall* be met. ***Waivers are allowed only if they meet the spirit and intent of these regulations.***

One need not go beyond the purpose statement to wonder if the current architect was aware of our Standards. For example:

Purpose:

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, and our natural and cultural resources;**
2. Encourage design which is **compatible with the architectural heritage of Durham, New Hampshire, and New England;**
3. **Enhance property values and foster civic pride;**

4. 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.
5. **Minimize potential conflicts between residential and nonresidential uses and between single family and multifamily uses;**

As someone who has sat on an ad hoc Architectural Design Regulations Review Committee, I am quite familiar with these regulations.

It is clear that the current design meets none of the Standards' overarching principles. It lacks a unified coherent design (also required) between the sprawling one-story grocery building and the two large residential buildings that are massive, out of scale, and blockish.

The buildings also lack a sense of design integrity, with their faux balconies, nested roof lines, tall retaining wall, mishmash of rooflines, and vast variation in building heights. All of the above are listed in the "not appropriate" category in our regulations. There is also a lack of pleasing architectural proportions in the design and placement of windows.

Color

I was also on the Architectural and Color Committees for Madbury Commons, Pauly's Pocket, and Mark Henderson's buildings on Main Street and Madbury Road.

Choosing aesthetically pleasing colors for a project is an art. Even those with an untrained eye know that the current plan falls short in its color scheme. Board members have commented that the colors look washed out and are unappealing. This is true.

There is also no sense of a pleasing color palette. If you look at Madbury Commons, you will see a color palette of 3 colors that work well together and that offer variation within a unified color scheme. You will see a window trim color specifically chosen to complement that palette accented by the choice of black window mullions to accent the window design. You will also see the project dotted with a carefully selected bright color that is used as a highlight or accent in the metal awnings and doors. These all work to provide variation within a unified whole. As architect Shannon Alther remarked about Madbury Commons, "The color palette sings." This is an aesthetic experience one can feel.

Other color palettes that work well in town: 1) the sage green of the Pauly's Pocket building against the brick, the Bagdad Wood building across from the library, and the Durham Public Library.

Color choice is critical to the success of a project.

Some of our Durham residents do have an eye for color. It would be helpful to know what brand of siding is being considered so those who are interested could go online and look at possible color palettes.

Windows and Window Trim

I agree with Paul Rasmussen that black mullions would add contrast and a dynamic complement to whatever window trim color will ultimately be selected. White trim and white mullions show a lack of imagination. Additionally, the architect should also look carefully at the Standards for window design and proportions. The current window choice and design create a mediocre look and are not handsome or pleasing to the eye.

Mass and Scale

Many have commented about the mass and scale of the buildings. The word “blockish” was repeated over and over again. I suggest the architect consider more of a townhouse look, breaking up the mass more intentionally with variations in placement along the street frontage, variations in color (within a unifying color scheme), and individual townhouse rooflines.

Tower – One Successful Element

The tower is really the only distinguishing element that I believe is worth keeping (assuming it can be integrated into a townhouse look, which it may not). In fact, I suggest that building be balanced with the same tower treatment on the other end. The window design in the tower is worth saving. Once a color palette has been selected, the white trim inside the brick elongated half circles should be replaced by an aesthetically pleasing trim color.

Height

For months, Emily Innes has been talking about a 1.5-story Hannaford/Rite Aid building. Now that it has been pointed out that our Standards do not allow a 1.5-story building adjacent to a 4-story building, we heard most recently the *same, exact design* referred to as a one-story building.

The reason for the one-story caveat in our regulations is because it was assumed that a one-story building downtown would soon be torn down or redeveloped into the desired 2.5 or 3 story building within short measure. *The spirit and intent was not intended to permit a 50-year old grocery building to get locked into place for another 50 years while allowing the vastly divergent variations in height of 3 stories between buildings.* The intent of the Standards, as stated, is to have *minor* variations in building height, *not greater than 1-1.5 stories*. This goes back to the concept integrity of a coherent design—to date, lacking in this project.

Overall Summary on Architecture

As Robin Mower bluntly stated, this architecture resembles “Anywhere USA.” It is mediocre and is not appropriate for one of our most important downtown parcels. Instead:

- Create more of a townhouse look that will break up the mass more successfully. This could involve more variation in rooflines.
- Revisit placement and proportion of windows along with color of mullions and window trim.
- Come up with a color palette that “sings.”

- Take the 4th floor of Building B and place it on the rear only portion of building C. That would allow for a more gentle step-up of heights while keeping the southern portion of Building C 3 only stories.
- Get rid of or hide the retaining wall and the open garage stalls.
- Reduce the number of parking spaces to allow for more community spaces, an increased natural buffer, larger sidewalks to accommodate outdoor seating, more trees and green space available for outdoor tables, and a more lush landscaping plan.

Unless members of the Board have particular expertise in Architectural Design, I urge you to follow the advice of Rick Taintor and hire an independent architect to review the design our Standards, point by point, and to offer suggestions for improvement.

Architecture and color choice will prove to be just as important as Storm Water Management or Fiscal Impact in the ultimate success of this project.

Sincerely,

Beth Olshansky
122 Packers Falls Road

PS I am going to be away on August 8 and thus I am uncertain as to whether I will be able to attend the Community Input Meeting via Zoom. I hope this letter will serve as part of that input if I am not able to join. I would like to be involved in the selection of colors if possible. There are others in the community who also have a great eye for color.