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FROM Dennis Meadows
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TO: Durham Planning Board

I respect and appreciate the many hours all Planning Board members invest in efforts to guide the development of Durham. Over the years your work has helped keep Durham an attractive community. But underlying your efforts are several key assumptions about the town's long-term future. They are being invalidated by the current pandemic. It is important now to reassess Durham's new options and constraints.

My 30+ years of residence in Durham, my time with the town's Land Stewardship Committee, and my experiences acquiring two important parcels for Durham have given me some ideas about the special role our town's lands can play in sustaining Durham's long-term appeal as an attractive place to live. In this letter I summarize a few of those ideas.

Most people do not yet understand that our country is in the earliest phase of a once-in-a-century, revolutionary event. Typically the pandemic is ignored by proceedings before the Board. Sean McCauly has called it an "arbitrary event." However, the evidence is clear. The World Bank just announced that the coronavirus pandemic has inflicted a "swift and massive shock" that will "cause the broadest collapse of the global economy since 1870." Most American citizens are now barred from entering Europe and many other regions, because the virus is increasingly out of control in our country. A recent survey found that 53 percent of closed restaurants do not expect to reopen - ever. Unemployment has recently increased faster than ever before in US history. About 20 million renters are at risk of eviction by the end of September. Approximately 2 million homeowners could lose their homes to foreclosure before the end of the year.

Durham has so far remained relatively untouched by these calamities. That is certainly due to good management. It also resulted from our low population density, relatively cautious residents, and, very importantly, from the sources of the town's revenue. Unlike many communities that rely heavily on tourism, rental properties, or commercial activity, Durham gets almost 60 percent of its income from property taxes. And the town's tax

base is principally comprised of single-family dwellings for long-term residents with stable jobs or reliable retirement incomes.

We have benefitted from a virtuous cycle. Homes in Durham generate adequate taxes for the town to support an excellent school system and a well-tended environment. Outstanding schools and environment, in turn, attract homeowners who value schools, appreciate the environment and are able and willing to pay relatively high taxes. Those benefits explain why many of us have chosen Durham as our hometown.

Durham's *2019 Annual Town Report* listed six main sources of revenue for the 2020 budget. Every one of them will be reduced by consequences of the virus. We expected to get almost a quarter of our 2020 revenues from the state and federal governments and from UNH. But all three of them are now beginning to confront their own horrendous budget gaps. I see no realistic possibility for Durham to avoid extended reductions in its municipal expenditures.

People in Durham are apprehensive about the virus and its effects. We want them to disappear soon; they will not. People are tired of masks, and social distancing, and quarantines with their restrictions on mass sports, cultural events, religion, and education. We want the need for them to disappear soon; they will not. People appreciate Durham as a relatively peaceful, happy, progressive, and beautiful community. We want it to retain all those features. It will, IF we honestly acknowledge the problems caused by the virus and act proactively to minimize them.

It is essential to work at sustaining Durham's long-term revenues. Before the virus struck, we could expect that UNH's growth would generate ever-increasing income for the town's landlords, shops, and commercial services - thus providing more tax revenues to Durham. Now that is no longer plausible.

The pandemic will amplify the consequences of declining birth rates to ensure enrollments at UNH decline long-term, and commercial activity will be depressed for many years. Therefore, property taxes will be increasingly important. Presently demand for housing in Durham is very high. Realtors are swamped by bids for Durham residences, but this could quickly change, if we take it for granted. The challenge is to sustain the

appeal of our schools, our recreational lands, and our urban center during a time of enforced decline in our municipal budget.

The recent decision to build a new middle school is an excellent start on enhancing our school system. Durham is doing a great job at improving the recreational appeal of its lands. Now it is important to focus on the center of Durham, our urban heart. There will be fewer short-term students in town. We need to give long-term residents more reasons for moving to Durham and spending time and money in our Central Business District.

Durham has a unique opportunity to determine the future character of its central district. It will not last long. There are currently four important properties available for redevelopment - the Red Tower parcel, the Plaza, 74 Main Street, and 66 Main Street.

Will those parcels be developed in a coherent fashion that increases and sustains the appeal of Durham to its long-term homeowners, or will we let individual promoters develop those crucial parcels merely with the goal of maximizing their own personal short-term profits?

You have substantial discretion in answering that question. Of course Durham must honor its legal obligations to land owners. But it is not required to violate its zoning code principles to accommodate developers pursuing projects that ignore the longer-term needs of the town and are based on now-obsolete assumptions about the economy. Will you waive those standards?

That question is being answered, by default, through your deliberations with different developers promoting diverse initiatives on their individual parcels. Before reacting to the separate initiatives of the owners as each of them seeks ways to maximize their own profits over the short term, I hope Durham will first proactively consider how its urban center could evolve to remain useful and appealing to the majority of its homeowners over the long term. That effort will require diverse efforts and inputs. I can't predict the results. But I do see four actions that are already justified.

First, reexamine the reports from the several extensive efforts by Durham citizens to create a vision for their town. Study the land use chapter of the Master Plan. Enormous effort was invested in those projects, and, they

produced valuable results which should be respected in discussions today that will affect the future character of our community.

Second, recognize the absolutely unique importance of the space occupied by the Durham shopping plaza. Expect and require the developer to comply there with our relevant zoning codes. Colonial Durham Associates disingenuously justifies its own requests for exemptions from our laws by citing the Cottages and other student housing complexes in Durham. They are absolutely not equivalent! Durham has many peripheral properties. If a student housing complex on one of them eventually fails in some way, the property's owner will bear much of the burden. Durham has only one center. If a student housing complex on it fails in some way, the burdens will be borne by all the town's residents - immediately and over the long term.

There is nothing inevitable about Durham remaining relatively attractive. The virtuous cycle can become a vicious cycle - lower appeal leads to declining house values producing smaller tax revenues supporting fewer services causing even lower appeal. Time delays and inflation would prevent many people from noticing this decline in its early stages, but it would be very unfortunate nevertheless.

Third, seek to suspend temporarily town committee deliberations on projects that will alter the fundamental character of the town until the virus subsides. If they do not use Zoom Durham citizens should not be forced to risk contagion to participate normally in deliberations that will affect the future of their town. Consideration of projects that affect few in the town should of course continue. Discussion of projects that will alter the character of the entire community should be paused. The town has offered delays to developers when they were requested; developers should be willing to return the favor. No one has a detailed, accurate image of the future. Mistakes are inevitable. However, an unnecessary pause now can easily be reversed later. Unwise construction now can not easily be reversed later.

Fourth, search for innovative ways that the 66 Main Street parcel could be used to enhance the quality of life in Durham for all its residents. I believe UNH will soon become more receptive to proposals that would convert some of its unused land into revenue that will support its core missions. Durham should be ready for that time with a plan and a proposal.