

To: Administrator Selig, Town Council, and Planning Board
From: Diane Chen
Date: November 10, 2020
Re: Transforming Durham, for the worse

I moved to Durham in 2013. I chose Durham for its charming and vibrant community and, especially, for its small-town feel. Since that time, I have become deeply disillusioned with the Durham decision makers.

The October 16, 2020 *Friday Updates* included the following phrase: *we have not been successful as a community in expanding the tax base as a result of restrictive zoning and a highly engaged citizenry possessing very high expectations.* I am a member of the highly engaged citizenry. This phrase makes it seem like we highly engaged citizenry are naive and unrealistic. This is false. This insulting characterization of residents as obstacles to “progress” leads me to submit this letter.

In 2017, I became involved with the CDA proposal to add 258 student dormitory beds to the Mill Plaza, which would violate Conditional Use zoning and ruin Durham’s largest and oldest family neighborhood. It would also make our one downtown Plaza a claustrophobic and unpleasant place to shop. If approved, the plan would create a vehicle/pedestrian traffic nightmare likely to become a case study for graduate programs in years to come on how to destroy a town.

This multi-year review process has become further compounded by the current ridiculous proposed zoning changes to add 4- and 5-story buildings and drive-throughs. I’m not aware of a single resident who thinks this is a good idea other than those on the Board or the Council. Perhaps this is why these proposals are being made during a pandemic when few members of the public can protest. When the Master Plan was discussed and approved, many residents were told how important their views were to the future of Durham. Even *proposing* these zoning changes puts the lie to the claim that Master Plan efforts and residents’ engagement hold any weight in Durham. Is our town really being run democratically?

What kind of Town is Durham? Is it really able to compete with Dover, Exeter, Concord, or Portsmouth in fulfilling developers’ dreams? I would argue “no,” since the town clearly does not have the infrastructure to support what’s contemplated by the zoning change. Until that changes, Durham is a bedroom community.

In addition, the first time I heard from the poor people who are protesting the abomination of Gerrish Drive housing complex with wetland violations, I felt simply terrible for those who were valiantly trying to stop this project and protect their neighborhood. In all three cases, because of the pressure to expand the tax base, and with officials’ public pronouncements that residents views should be dismissed as naïve, developers know they can expect a friendly hearing from the appropriate town boards.

I worked many years for two different real estate developers. I understand and appreciate the need for responsible development. However, it seems to me that everyone is thinking about short-term funds rather than what’s good for the Town in the long run. That’s a regrettably short-sighted way to make decisions that would transform Durham forever, and not in a good way.

There are other options. In the town I lived in previously, the parents of any student who participated in extracurricular sports were expected to contribute between \$150-\$300 to ameliorate the costs of those programs. Surely with all the smart people in this town, there must be many creative ways to close this “funding gap” without destroying the character of Durham, visually and politically.