

Dear Members of the Durham NH Town Planning Board,

1/12/2022

Please allow me to thank you sincerely for what has become a long and arduous task of considering the re development of the Mill Plaza. You have shown wisdom and patience in not moving on this until all voices have spoken, and you are satisfied that no damage will be done to the environment, nor to surrounding streets and neighborhoods.

I have lived on Faculty Road for 12 years, and have spoken at previous public meetings of the Board. I wish I could say that I am pleased with Colonial's proposal that is being considered for the Mill Plaza's re development, but I am deeply concerned. Others have written to you about run off, parking and traffic, conditional use, College Brook, safety, and other important considerations. I will not be re iterating these here.

I will contain my concerns to three issues that have been written about by researchers with far greater knowledge than I have. Reading three volumes recently has re ignited my deep concerns and worries about the direction of the Mill Plaza development. These scholars are not "Ivory Tower" idealists. These are people who are thoroughly practical researchers.

The first is Eric Klinenberg's *Palaces for the People*. Klinenberg traveled through the USA in order to observe first hand the difference between two kinds of communities: those with little or no *social infrastructure*, and those that had a well functioning *social infrastructure*. The differences he found between these two could hardly be more dramatic. But first a definition: *Social Infrastructure* is a measureable quality that arises from a community that has spaces, walkways, and structures that not only allow, but encourage good healthy social interaction, within and among various ages. Example: The satellite library that is offered close to normal retail stores. One can relax, find rooms where discussions are encouraged, places where meetings are held, and there is always coffee available. The difference such a small library makes on the community is truly remarkable. That is just an example. Right now we have a very good social place that helps the Plaza's social infrastructure. The Works Cafe. One can grab a coffee or stay for a long lunch meeting with friends or associates. But, I have heard a rumor that Hannaford may be looking to take over the Works' space. If that happens, there will be *no social infrastructure* available unless someone else creates a new cafe or similar space.

Klinenberg details one case in which two communities were situated side by side. There was a single road that separated them. One had *good social infrastructure* and other had none. The one without had violence, shootings, and drug houses, while right across the road the other one was safe day and night because it was an active *functioning social infrastructure* with cafes, a book store, a small art studio, with conversation space.

I mention this extreme case to make a point. We have no idea what the actual effect will be of putting a college student housing project close to the families who reside on Faculty Road and Chesley Drive. But there is every indication that it will deteriorate them over time.

Second: Author, researcher and architect at Berkley for over 40 years, Christopher Alexander remains one of the most creative and brilliant thinkers. His early works are now adopted as *the standard* for communities all over the world. One book in particular his "A Pattern Language" stands out. In it he details the impact of certain universal patterns that are known to offer communities greater health and even happiness. As just a single example of the 250+ patterns he and his team identified, there is the pattern he calls, *Half Wall and Tree*. He found that this one pattern engaged walkers and passer bys encouraging social interaction. Coves, and coved spaces also help in that they invite conversation,

both inside and outside. The book is a marvel of the commitment of this author to the health and happiness of human beings. He was the first Ph.D. in architecture to graduate from Harvard. His impact on town planning and architecture cannot be overstated.

So, here again, we would hope that nothing in the current re development plan would go against his tried and true concepts. But all I have to imagine is the ugliness and insensitivity of that 13 foot wall retaining yards of fill. Alexander would scratch that from his drawing board for sure. And put up walkways with half walls and trees, or stepped walls with plantings. There are better ways for sure.

And that leads to the last. You have already heard from Prof. Karen Weiss who wrote the book "Party School." I bought this book and having read it I am even more deeply concerned. She is a researcher who went across the USA interviewing, students, staff, and neighbors in college towns. She found that it was nearly impossible to prevent or contain the after effects of student drinking on nearby neighbors. Some of the colleges she studied considered Tuesday evening the beginning of the weekend. The most salient parts of her book were the quotes of those students who were not in the partying groups. These students spoke about how often the partying group would ruin days and nights for the non drinking students, as well as cause genuine damage to the lawns, cars and properties of those unfortunate contiguous neighbors. In all the cases, the police would attempt to intervene but the sheer volume and arrays of drinking groups made it untenable. Even those within the partying groups said that as soon as they graduate they will look for homes and communities that are nothing like the ones that they affected during their own drinking days and nights at college.

If you put all three of these ideas together, you can see that unless you move the student housing and place it far north where Hannaford currently is, we will be inundated with problems that have no solution, and will lead to the deterioration of the finest neighborhood I have ever lived in. I sincerely implore the Board not to allow this to happen. Please insist that Colonial find a way to put the student housing where Hannaford now stands. It is not impossible, but it does take good planning. There are buildings that are built *over* other buildings that *do not touch each other* at any point. It can be done.

That would help the housing issue, but your plan should seriously consider other ideas of Christopher Alexander's. For instance, half walls with trees along curved pathways; trellised pathways; curved garden walls, imaginative walkways along College Brook greenway. A small satellite library.

From Klinenberg, you could make sure there is a small, friendly bookstore with seats and tables to encourage small group interaction with coffee. The Portsmouth Book and Bar on a small scale would be perfect. Anwhere that you could include curved window spaces with seats would go a long way to winning us over. It all needs to be made for healthy social infratstructure, places to engage in casual discussion with our neighbors and friends as well as those of various ages. A small satellite library. All of these can happen here. Planting well established trees would help. Not sapplings.

Thank you for your extended efforts. Please hear the deep concerns from us neighbors who love the Faculty Neighborhood. It is a very special place. But not immune to damage if we don't find solutions.

Sincerely,

John Mince  
23 Faculty Road  
Durham, NH 03824

