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The Town of Durham, NH
Planning Board

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**Re: Redevelopment of 7 Mill Road, Mill Plaza,
For May 19 Public hearing**

Dear members of the Planning Board:

Although, I am not currently a resident, Durham is my beloved hometown. I came here in 1951 as an 8-year-old when my parents built our house at 29 Park Court, situated at the edge of Church Hill.

I attended Durham Central Schools and graduated from Oyster River High School, class of 1961.

I loved growing up in Durham with its people, fields, forests, and streams. The university generously shared its facilities for playing ball, swimming, and hockey.

Durham was a much smaller town then, and it had few of the issues we are here to discuss today.

In the intervening years, I left Durham to study architecture in Boston. I, then, embarked on a 40-year career as an architect/planner, designing projects in Maine, NH, Massachusetts, and Vermont and later in Washington State.

I have served on two planning boards and was the president of a local Design Review Board in Washington state for nine years. I have a great deal of admiration (and sympathy) for you as board members in navigating these contemporary issues.

However, I am writing in opposition to this application:

1. I oppose Student Housing at this scale in the Downtown Core:

Buildings B&C propose student housing of 238 beds. These are essentially private, off-campus dorms. Students, as a monolithic demographic, are too disruptive for the town core. Noise, light, and safety issues abound.

There is a parking requirement for this use, and it would be, most likely, long-term permit parking which would displace short-term parking needed for shoppers and visitors. Durham's downtown needs some permit parking for shopkeepers. The downtown is better served by housing which addresses a more diverse market such as workforce, downsizers, and even small luxury apartments. This population would be more suitable stewards, a more stable population for the village core.

2. Inordinate Sitework:

The site plan proposes the blasting away of 1.1 acres+/- of ledge and urban forest. Conservatively, this is about 18,000 Cubic Yards of material and would necessitate a large retaining wall at the NE corner and along the eastern boundary. I believe this is too extreme and unnecessary.

3. I oppose the Bank drive-up Window:

It promotes this development and Durham's Core as "drive-through". This bank function is vestigial, given online banking, and it has a limited life. The Master Plan clearly wants to promote a walkable downtown core, where users park and walk, and a village core which can be a destination. This plan, sadly, is still a strip mall.

4. The parking requirements, in general, are unclear. The requirements of this plan should be reviewed in the context of the downtown core and adjacent districts. Some uses may benefit from shared allocation with other uses.

This plan has too many parking spaces. The current practice of sale of long-term parking should not be allowed as a component of a required allocation.

5. College Brook is not adequately protected. Both the Wetland and Shoreline overlay districts call for 75' buffers. This plan proposes impervious, drivable surfaces within those buffers in contravention of a previous legal agreement. Non-Conforming uses can not be continued (grandfathered) in a new application nor is mitigation possible without a variance. This application does not meet any of the 5 criteria required by state law for issuing a variance.

6. The proposal is out of sync with the Master Plan.

Durham has done a remarkably good job in developing its Downtown core business district, so far. Mill Plaza, in land area, looks to be about 1/3 of the downtown district. Mill Plaza should be part of Durham's walkable core. In terms of parking, it needs to be a "producer of pedestrians". As such, transit infrastructure is to be continued, adequate short-term parking should be encouraged, and long-term parking discouraged. Parking is an asset and should be charged accordingly. Cycling infrastructure, including adequate racks are to be continued.

Much has been made of this Conditional Use process as having a "gap between the application we have on-the-table and the public's view of what is possible". What is on the table is the future of downtown Durham. It serves a diverse community of, not only the University, but a multigenerational, multi-interest town and the surrounding population. Universities are centers of culture and promote the exchange of ideas. Durham has an opportunity with its downtown core to facilitate beneficial social encounters, demonstrate excellent design, and to be a truly extraordinary place.

I urge the board to reject this Application. Like preceding applications for Mill Plaza, scores of townspeople, stakeholders, and design professionals have been ignored.

The plan is flawed in so many ways, has the support of very few, and is roundly unsupported by hundreds. If it were allowed to pass, it would continue decades of anodyne design, inflict further mediocrity, environmental damage, and rob Durham of any chance of being a truly remarkable PLACE!

Respectfully,
John Shevenell

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Oyster River HS 1961