

16 August 2021

Dear Planning Board members and Town Councilors,

I am writing again to express my increasing alarm at how the Durham Town Government has largely been disregarding citizen input on the Mill Plaza and Church Hill Woods and seems to be hell bent on allowing the downtown to become primarily a student housing village at a time when enrollment for UNH is certain to decline significantly with the “enrollment cliff” in 2025 and beyond.

Moreover, misinformation about UNH enrollments on the part of Town officials and others has been allowed to go uncorrected. And most recently, residents (including UNH students) who have expressed legitimate concerns about the pending Mill Plaza plans have been falsely maligned by Town officials as being “anti-UNH” and “anti-student”, which is an outrage. The truth about UNH’s long-term concerns about adding more off-campus student housing when they anticipate having difficulty filling their on-campus dorms from 2025 onward has never been properly considered by the Planning Board. And the lessons from the research literature on college-town zoning (the need to separate “student zones” from “family zones”) has been ignored.

When my wife and I arrived in Durham in August, 1969 to begin a long career at UNH, the University was just beginning an expansion from around 5,000 to 10,000 students and the deans that I talked to at my interview were expressly interested in increasing the focus on research and graduate education. At the same time, New Hampshire was 50th in the nation in support for public education and that has not changed.

Durham was a special community. People were willing to pay extra high property taxes so their children could attend good schools and because citizens could enjoy a small-town feel in a downtown that was more than an extension of the UNH campus.

Now the University brags about being a major research university, but the dirty little secret is that the budget for the College of Life Sciences and Agriculture (COLSA) is funded by over 90% undergraduate tuition. For years the rumor mill on campus had included plans by the University to grow to 20,000 students. That goal was often denied, yet enrollments kept inching upwards. By my own experience and that of my colleagues, admission standards declined significantly with that expansion hope in mind. It has barely reached 15,000, and only twice in the last couple of decades. UNH knows it cannot keep enrollments from declining.

During my last academic year (2019-2020), only COLSA maintained its admission levels, while the University suffered a 9% decline in enrollment. For six years, ending five years ago, I was Chair of Biological Sciences and almost every year during that time, a representative from the administration would come to our Executive Committee meetings and talk about how the demographics were going to be declining in numbers of applicants and how we needed to do our best to maintain enrollments. When 90% of your budget is based on undergraduate tuition that is a precarious situation to be in.

Another hat I wore for many years was the coordinator of the Marine, Estuarine and Freshwater Biology (MEFB) major and was a primary go-to person for Admissions which often asked me to meet with visiting prospective students and their parents for the mostly marine biology major. I also represented the MEFB Major at the open houses for prospective and admitted students. Thus, I have done more than my share to sell UNH.

When you combine the current pandemic and online teaching (2020 was my last semester after 51 years), combined with the very real projected declines in prospective student numbers, from the major drop in birth rate since 2007 and numerous other challenges, UNH is bracing for a very serious enrollment crisis. That means that the Town of Durham also has to prepare for thousands of fewer students in Durham each year. And it becomes **more important than ever to maintain a downtown core that is attractive to long-term residents as well as students**. Adding hundreds of more student beds in our only shopping center is certainly not a long-term solution. In fact, I believe it will lead to Durham's near demise. Not only will we lose the feel and functioning of a community-oriented downtown, but also, as our student housing in the outskirts of town empty out, there will be very real economic impacts that will be felt in the reduction of tax revenue. Because of this, I regret the Planning Board decision not to request a town-wide economic impact study. The Planning Board should not vote while ignoring these very likely impacts.

On a side note, I spent some research time a number of years ago at the University of California, Santa Barbara (a "serious" research university where faculty hide from undergraduates). Nearby was the community of Chula Vista. Chula Vista is a full-blown student ghetto where there were very few families and mostly slum lords exploiting students. Increasingly, my sense of the development projects in Durham remind me of Chula Vista.

It does not have to be this way, but the way the Town is dealing with the Mill Plaza proposal to facilitate a bad outcome rather than working for the interests of the resident community is extremely troubling. All Durham residents, including UNH students, would benefit from a vibrant, community-centered shopping plaza.

We all want a downtown, including a renovated and attractive Plaza, that supports its resident community and not only student tenants, but we seem to be on the path into a downward spiral of cultural and economic decline.

How can you be a magnet to young families and keep residents shopping in town (And equally important, attract prospective students and parents looking for a small college town environment) when you are increasingly packing the downtown with more and more student housing? A plaza that is open, green and inviting would help the University attract those students as well as instill a heightened sense of community for all residents.

And that is to say nothing of the proposed parking lot on a to-be decimated Church Hill woods for plaza tenants, with the entrance/exit in the heart of the Historic District; that should eliminate any reason to call it a historic district or to keep proudly calling Durham a committed

“Tree City”. Not only does this proposed student parking run counter to Durham’s Master Plan concept of a walkable downtown (as well as the Town goal to “increase the quantity and quality of existing forest cover in developed areas” MP, 2015, p. LU-16), but it also even goes against UNH’s Master Plan which discourages students from bringing their cars to college.

I am not happy to be writing these things. I know you all want the best for Durham. Yet something is going very wrong. Right now I see nothing but negatives and conflict, including likely legal challenges to plans that clearly violate our Zoning, common sense, and the will of the people. Please do not ignore the experiences of our downtown neighbors that make clear that adding 258 more students and their friends so close to a family neighborhood not only defies commonsense but also ignores our Master Plan and Conditional Use Zoning criteria.

All the best, Larry

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