

June 19, 2020

Re: Mill Plaza Hearing

To Durham Planning Board Members:

As a young Research Faculty member at UNH, I bought the house at 17 Faculty Road in 1986. I loved the Faculty Neighborhood for its proximity to UNH and the town center, and its friendly atmosphere similar to those of my childhood homes in Providence, RI. A treasured feature of the neighborhood, close to our house, was the trail through the woods and over College Brook to the Mill Plaza. The woods provided a reasonably dense buffer between residential and commercial Durham, at least at the location of my house (although light pollution from the Plaza was, and remains, problematic). The Plaza housed most of life's essentials, including The Uppercut, Zyla's, China Buffet, and even for awhile Wilderness Trails. For me, the most negative feature of the Plaza was the excessively large asphalt paving and the number of parking spaces that were unused. I later learned that a substantial number of the used spaces were actually for an unlicensed parking-space rental business.

My first feeling of insecurity about life in the Faculty Neighborhood came a few years later when I learned about a suggestion to create a second entrance to the plaza at the end of Chesley Drive. It was clear that this entrance would destroy the character of the whole neighborhood, would pave over the Chesley Marsh, and compromise the barrier between residential and commercial Durham. During that time, I helped to collect signatures from my neighbors on Faculty Road to lobby against extending Chesley Drive. (Hundreds of people from all over Town signed similar petitions.) The effort was successful. We soon found out, however, that Perry Bryant who owned the 1.2-acre wooded lot between Faculty Road and College Brook, was interested in developing this critical buffer between the neighborhood and the Plaza. Several years later, after discussions with neighbors, my wife and I bought the parcel in order to stabilize and preserve the essential barrier between residential and commercial Durham.

My wife and I were thrilled when, some years ago, Colonial Durham Associates supported a "Visioning Session" to collect ideas on how to rebuild the Plaza to better serve the Durham community. Although we certainly appreciated the Plaza, it was dated and unattractive, the space was underutilized, there was far too much impermeable surface, and College Brook was not appropriately featured or protected. The results of the Visioning Session were several ambitious redesigns of the Plaza that generated a great deal of enthusiasm among residents – and won the NH Planners Association "Plan of the Year" award.

The citizen-driven vision for the Mill Plaza was quickly discarded without explanation. Instead Colonial Durham decided in 2014 to pursue dormitory-style student housing, despite the huge surge in new student housing in Durham in prior years (a surge which had led the Council and Planning Board in 2013 to make mixed-use with residential by conditional-use only in the CBD). Moreover, the community had clearly expressed desire for more mixed-age housing, and Master Plan goals had long stated the need for keeping student housing separate from family neighborhoods. This plan to add more student beds is perplexing because available student housing has exceeded demand (even before the health emergency) and the student population is projected to decline dramatically within a few years. We should also not be surprised if the current pandemic creates instability at UNH. Colonial Durham's plans have not generated any support from a community eager to see this central property redeveloped, rather they have undermined the goodwill and work of the hundreds of Durham residents who participated in the visioning exercises and who want to see the community, not just the developer, benefit from the redevelopment.

One of the few arguments in favor of the current proposal is the additional tax revenue generated by a redeveloped Mill Plaza. However, these estimated tax benefits do not include the reduction in property values of other properties that are negatively impacted, specifically homes adjacent to the Mill Plaza, but also on long-term assessed value of the numerous student rental properties that have recently been built. Wouldn't a better-designed Mill Plaza redevelopment not only generate more net tax revenue overall for the Town, as well as have the essential component that is currently missing – community support? Developers may dangle tax dollars before us, but it is important that you insist on a project that contributes more to the community than just additional revenue from that one property in isolation. An approved redevelopment should enhance downtown and the adjacent neighborhood; it is impossible to argue that the current proposal achieves that standard.

The proposed incorporation of College Brook into the project and more effective storm water management are much-needed improvements, although there are important technical questions that have been raised regarding the storm water management in the current plan. Otherwise, the proposed shops and offices are essentially similar to those that exist currently, and the design is not just uninspiring, it degrades the adjacent neighborhood by squeezing in what is essentially an oversized dormitory complex right next to family homes. The supermarket (Hannaford) and drugstore are effectively unchanged from their original 50-year-old design. We all know that redeveloping the site without including the Hannaford's building will yield a severely compromised result.

The proposed paved space for parking is still large and dominant; nevertheless, accommodating cars for an additional 258 students (plus their visitors) will create a parking and traffic crisis. The private agreement between Colonial Durham and Hannaford regarding Hannaford's demand that there be more parking than is currently available led to discussions with two local developers to replace the sharply sloped Church Hill woods at the rear of the Plaza with a large asphalt-topped treeless parking lot/garage, an environmentally damaging proposal that would further reduce or eliminate the buffer between residential and commercial Durham, as well as increase College Brook flooding. In addition, it seems likely that this parking lot would exacerbate traffic issues on Main Street. The *entire* proposal is further weakened by its failure to place the bulk of the residences on the north side of the lot as stipulated by the 2015 Settlement. Presumably, this stipulation in the Settlement was meant to protect the Faculty Neighborhood from the negative impacts of the proposed high-density housing. The proposed placement of a large dormitory extending to the southeast corner of the lot, adjacent to the neighborhood, certainly undermines that intention.

In summary, in spite of years of effort on the part of architects, planners, Durham planning boards, and citizens, the proposed plan offers the community few benefits, and many deficits. Imagine a Mill Plaza that contributed to an attractive, vibrant, mixed-age downtown that would truly serve the community! The proposed plan not only falls far short of this vision but would severely damage our neighborhood by effectively eliminating the commercial-residential buffer and inserting oversized, dormitory-style housing in a family neighborhood. I will enthusiastically support a redevelopment plan that enhances our community; this plan falls far short of that.

I appreciate that the Planning Board members volunteer their time and expertise to the community, and the unified and vocal resistance to this plan may be exasperating at times. I think it would be a mistake for the Planning Board to think that there is no plan that would satisfy the abutters and many others who speak out against the proposal, and I would remind the Board and the developers that the community already worked hard and came together around an award-winning plan. We are asking for

a redevelopment that enhances our community. Thank you for considering our concerns and working toward a redevelopment that works for everyone.

Thank you for your consideration of my perspective and for your hard work on behalf of the community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Martin A. Lee". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Martin A. Lee
17 Faculty Road