

An Open Letter to Durham, NH, Officials

“Essence of Faculty Neighborhood” — What’s at Risk

Mary LaPolice, 7 Magrath Rd, Durham

While a university community needs vibrant areas of student housing, a fundamental practice of planning in a university community is not placing large student housing developments immediately adjacent to family neighborhoods with no transition zone or buffer in between.

—Planner Scott Bogle, letter to Durham Planning Board, January 6, 2022

My name is Mary LaPolice. I reside in the Faculty Neighborhood on Magrath Road. Magrath is two roads parallel from Faculty Road for reference. Growing up, I lived on Thompson Lane around the corner from Magrath.

I do not consider myself an activist, or someone familiar enough with legalese by any means. I am concerned about environmental impact, particularly of tree/forest loss, wildlife and watershed, but I am not versed enough to consider myself an environmental scientist.

But I have lived in Durham my whole life, including graduating from Oyster River High School and UNH, with the exception of about 11 years after college when it seemed like the thing to do was move to Portsmouth. I made that move first as a single person, then remained there as a married person, homeowner, and full-time working mother.

However, as with my experience and that of many others, when you have been raised in Durham, you either stay, or as I did, you come back. Especially once you have had children of your own.

There are many reasons for this: School systems, familiarity, extended family, and community among them. What I want to talk about is not only coming back to Durham, but coming back to the Faculty Neighborhood. I want to do this, not in terms of statistics, the conditional uses, the student housing overflow, the slighted feeling we sometimes get from the Town offices, but about the Essence of the Faculty Neighborhood: Its people, its heart and why it’s important for the greater good of Durham as a town, not as a university, but a town first. We are not a neighborhood to be “sacrificed” or treated out of sight out of mind from those living farther away from campus.

I happen to work for a very large corporation in the field of Sales. Corporations talk a lot about their Culture. That elusive sense of belonging, mission, vision, and general awareness and actions of their employees. All those things that hopefully contribute to an overall well-being of the workplace and productivity levels. A loss of culture is often cited in business as contributing to a company’s downfall.

One of the greatest things about the Faculty Neighborhood is our culture and our essence. It doesn’t show up on paper or in pictures or in google earth, but it carries over into our downtown marketplace where we see each other in the pharmacy, the grocery, take our parents to doctors’ appointments at

Appledore, or work out at the (former) Wildcat Fitness center. We handle our banking and dry-cleaning, pick up our pizzas, and unfortunately but no longer, used to love Bella's restaurant that managed to be consistently crowded, not primarily with students, but rather townspeople and neighbors.

In our neighborhood, we are a warm, generous people, caring and interested in each other. We have the physical layout of small blocks and small yards that allows for that age-old scenario, now lost in some bigger neighborhoods, where any time of year you can see neighbors out walking and gathering in the street and in front yards, chatting, laughing, crossing over to help with a lawn mower, borrow a tool, and generally look out for each other, keep an eye on each other's houses, on our elderly residents, and our children. Most of our houses are so close to each other and to the street, that we are always within shouting distance of a "Hello" and a "how are you?"

I fear the loss of our last bit of downtown that is not filled with student housing – the Plaza which has always been a buffer between our family neighborhood and mass student housing. I know that such a change will weaken the reason people enjoy our neighborhood. Now, we have proximity to that downtown, something that feels like a town, but separate from a campus. That change will only allow for the further takeover of our family friendly space for it to become more infused with house flippers and student housing, lower property values, and fewer young families looking for affordable housing in a quiet neighborhood to start their young families when our beloved elderly have moved from their homes to Riverwoods. Nobody likes to see the lights and sounds of multiple high rises in backyards so close to town.

In the late 1950's, my parents came to Durham after my father got his PhD at Penn State. They had met in the Air Force at a base on Long Island, where my dad was serving out his GI Bill. He later became an internationally renowned research professor in Plant Breeding and Genetics at UNH, retiring after 36 years. They lived on Thompson Lane, their first and only home in Durham for over 60 years. His starting salary back then was \$6,000 a year and their home cost \$16,000. Back then, if you came to Durham to join the faculty & staff at UNH, you were directed to the Faculty Neighborhood by UNH to build and buy your homes, mostly so you could walk to campus and leave the single car in each household to be used for transporting children. Most of the homes then were owned by professors, high school teachers, and UNH head coaches – and it is still enough of the remnant of that today to maintain the feeling of it truly being the *Faculty* Neighborhood.

The Faculty Neighborhood is also known for something else that's special: A multigenerational community. We have many examples of adult children (including myself) moving back to the neighborhood with their families or to raise their new families, where their elderly or retired parents still reside, sometimes even across the street, or around the corner, or even in the same house. Grandparents helping with childcare, adult children helping with senior care. It's a full-circle phenomenon, and we welcome it. It's part of the essence we share in Faculty Neighborhood.

My fear is that as large student housing establishments, especially in our last open space in Mill Plaza, crowd in among empty retail space (or those tailored only to college students) and unused offices, more old residents and new residents will feel the urge to move out of the Faculty Neighborhood and out of Durham.

I already know neighbors and residents who have started to refuse to engage in any commerce in Durham because of the student crowding, increased school year traffic, and lack of parking. They drive further away to the Lee traffic circle and Dover or Portsmouth. Why pay the high taxes in Durham if you're forced to do all your business elsewhere? Friday Updates email has taken to plead with residents to frequent downtown businesses. Why do you think that is?

When my son was little in the early 2000's, our Durham downtown offered so much more than today, or that it will under the proposed Mill Plaza project. There was a group that held children's music and puppet shows in the marketplace parking lot on the site of proposed Building B, next to the bank. It was during summer evenings, and it was free, fun, and family oriented. Local children's performers like "Wayne from Maine" would delight both children and parents alike, and many young families gathered round and went for ice cream after in the Durham Marketplace ice cream spot (now also gone.)

The Mill Plaza project is seen by many of us as the last straw, capping off our density housing problem. How can a responsible Planning Board consider crowding in with multi-story student housing our last remaining open area, as well as destroying our last urban forests in the Plaza and on Church Hill and create a parking lot on Church Hill Woods just to get this project over the top. I know many Portsmouth residents who lament that overcrowding buildings has ruined the essence of that seacoast city.

We don't even need the expert input you have received from those who study typical college-student night life to know what our neighborhood streets and paths will sound like late at night and will look like after a lively weekend: The beer cans and bottles, and worse in our gardens and roadsides. Our zoning forbids negative impacts on the adjoining neighborhood. The Faculty Neighborhood is the Plaza adjoining neighborhood. Please protect it from damage.

Please seek to consider the culture of Durham, its actual residents, not just its part-time student residents and please help to preserve the essence of the Faculty Neighborhood by reconsidering the necessity of this entire project.

Thank you.
Mary LaPolice
7 Magrath Durham