

August 26, 2020

Planning Board
8 Newmarket Road
Durham, NH 03824

RE: *Continued Public Hearing - Mill Plaza Redevelopment. 7 Mill Road. Continued discussion of proposed architectural design. Continued review of application for site plan and conditional use for mixed use redevelopment project and activity within the wetland and shoreland overlay districts. Colonial Durham Associates, property owner. Sean McCauley, agent. Joe Persechino, Tighe & Bond, engineer. Emily Innes and Sharon Ames, Harriman, project designer. Ari Pollack, attorney. (Rick Taintor is serving as the Town's Contract Planner.) Central Business District. Map 5, Lot 1-1.*

Topic of this letter: Traffic Impact Study, preliminary comments

Greetings,

The traffic impact study unintentionally showcases the elephant in the room—nonexistent parking for the residential tenants and their visitors—and highlights the shortcomings of the approach the Planning Board has taken to review this application.

We have said it before, but perhaps there is still time: Focus on the big picture instead of details that depend on stakes that could and perhaps should be moved.

It is not that simply that we continue in the public hearing phase and that deliberations have yet to take place. The process must be followed. But by letting the applicant set the agenda of which topics to address—and by not pushing back hard on concerning features of the plan—we risk having closed a window in which significant questions could be asked with adequate time for the applicant to review and perhaps change course. And we risk the perception that this is a “done deal,” despite the belief of many that we can ask for something better.

Again, I want to bring to the attention of the Board—half of whose members have joined partway through this six-year review—that it is likely that most (if not all) residents would like this property to be thoughtfully redeveloped and that in 2014 well over 100 of us signed a petition stating the same.

A traffic impact study has been problematic from the get-go. At the January 22, 2020 meeting the applicant noted that it hoped to submit the study in March. Numerous delays have followed, the submission is inadequate, and it appears that a fundamental agreement with the anchor tenant—parking management—has yet to be reached. Although that is not within the purview of the Board, it exemplifies the larger agreement between property owner and anchor tenant that should have been settled prior to submitting the application.

I urge the Board to act on Rick Taintor's suggestion to require a “revised and expanded report that adequately addresses” the matters he raises in his report for this meeting.

A few observations about specific points that must be better addressed follow.

Pedestrian safety

The study notes.

Existing pedestrian volumes are shown in Table 4-2 and Figure 12. Future pedestrian volumes were estimated using the proportionality of the existing retail to the future retail (1% expansion), and *by assuming that half of students living in the off-campus housing will be active pedestrians during the evening peak hour.*

On what was the above assumption based? What about pedestrian visitors? What about residents, including school children, who walk to and from the Faculty neighborhood?

We also know there is significant pedestrian traffic between student residential properties, whether apartments or fraternities, from locations downtown, at the edge of town, particularly on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night. We also know that the bars on Main Street are a stone's throw away and that they generate significant traffic.

Table 4-2 shows that 123 pedestrian "trips" at the Main Street and Mill Road intersection are anticipated for the future, including a 34 percent increase over that reflected in the current traffic count. One: I assume that location is the crosswalk from the east to the west and that the analysis would not "cover" the informal but often used, more dangerous shortcut crossing south-north-south at that point and easterly to Madbury Road.

Conclusion: Understandably, the study is based on engineering models, but it does not account for on-the-ground human behavior that those of us who know the area observe. Often (mostly) young people walk into the street with their eyes not on the traffic but on their cellphones. They often do not use crosswalks. So no study can account for the increase in driver challenges that the addition of hundreds of pedestrians will present.

I do not know how one incorporates this kind of information into an evaluation of the impact that the proposed development would have on traffic, but it is important that it be done.

Access/egress driveway

Regardless of what the study notes, this driveway has known sight line issues, even apart from the midday fatal pedestrian accident that occurred there a few years ago. Who among us has not nearly missed being hit or hitting another car as we inch out—over the crosswalk—to see northbound traffic, particularly at UNH rush hour or during winter months with sun glare?

The proposal presents a unique opportunity to improve the sight line by moving the catch basin and straightening out the north-south crossing.

Ideally, the driveway would be moved north by some 10 feet or so to improve the sight line vis à vis the trees along College Brook.

Sincerely yours,

Robin