

September 24, 2020

Planning Board
8 Newmarket Road
Durham, NH 03824

RE: Public Hearing - Mill Plaza Redevelopment. 7 Mill Road. 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, second set of comments | primary focus on pedestrians

Dear Members of the Board,

While Rick Taintor, our Community Planning Consultant, brings many assets to the table, Durham's community and institutional memory/knowledge is not one. Since we cannot rely on the Town Planner to remind the Board of previous student housing projects that may shed light on the current application, and Board members who were sitting for those reviews have only mentioned those in passing, I would like to focus the Board's attention on the Madbury Commons and Orion student housing projects and related pedestrian/circulation studies.

First, the parallels with Mill Plaza vis à vis traffic analyses are clear: (1) a large number of student beds, (2) a minimal number of parking spaces, and (3) a prime downtown location within easy walking distance of UNH and stores.

Second, I and others have suggested that the Board review built projects to see whether we got what was approved—whether comparing the as built to the approved plans or a site walk to review the physical project. To my knowledge, that has not happened. But it would have seemed entirely appropriate to evaluate **actual pedestrian traffic generated by Madbury Commons and Orion** relative to their projected studies in the context of the current traffic impact study for the Mill Plaza. Of course, the pandemic has disrupted those patterns, so the question is how that could be done today with any degree of accuracy.

Let's take the example of Madbury Commons. No traffic study was conducted for that project, based on assumptions that the small amount of available parking would be used primarily for retail purposes. We all know by observation that actual vehicular traffic entering and exiting Madbury Commons varies considerably from what was anticipated and that **pedestrian crossings of Madbury Road at sites other than crosswalks is routine**.

We also have professional references relevant to the Mill Plaza: (1) the 2014 "Pedestrian Traffic Study" prepared by Pernaw, (2) the 2013 "Access and Circulation Assessment" prepared by Vanasse for Orion; and (3) the "Peter T. Paul College Traffic Impact Assessment" report that was prepared by UNH Campus Planning in the fall of 2013 (per the Pernaw report (not posted on the Town website).

So, let's see where the Tighe & Bond study falls short of those for Madbury Commons and Orion student housing projects.

Tighe & Bond,
Mill Plaza: Traffic Impact and Access Study
July 13, 2020

Excerpts:

1) Pedestrian volumes

- Section 2.3 Existing Traffic Data: "...weekday evening peak periods (4:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m.)" [apparently per traffic count conducted May 8, 2018]
- Section 4.4 Pedestrian Activity: "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."

2) Intersection sight distances

- Executive Summary: "Intersection and stopping sight distance measurements were also conducted at the site driveway. Based on the observations, there is sufficient sight distance in both directions at the site driveway for speeds that exceed the posted speed limit." [Comment: This does not take into account human behavior, including exiting drivers pulling out well over the crosswalk; nor sun glare late in the day, including during afternoon rush hour, nor the challenges of attending to simultaneous vehicular and non-vehicular events at that location.]

The Tighe & Bond traffic impact study gives **short shrift to residential pedestrian activity**, as Board members also noted at last night's meeting. Questions include:

- What about a "night peak hour" on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays while Main Street bars are open—and immediately after they close—captured in the Orion report?
- Where is coverage of morning activity—when many UNH classes are held?
- What might be the incremental number of pedestrians using the passage from the Plaza to Main Street along the Grange?
- Does the study incorporate the likelihood of numerous visitors to the residential buildings, i.e., not just the total number of residents?
- Why does this study omit analysis for the midday peak UNH campus schedule, i.e., the Thursday noon to 1pm peak noted in the Madbury Commons pedestrian study as the busiest pedestrian time?
- Why does it not assume there will be comings and goings from and to and from the residential buildings throughout the day to the same degree as Madbury Commons?
- Human nature is to seek the shortest, most direct route with the fewest obstacles. How does the study address this feature of pedestrian behavior—Main Street, Mill Road?
- Are there points at which "pedestrian mobility and safety" can be improved?

Please see studies from other downtown Durham student housing projects, with a few relevant excerpts provided below.

Stephen B. Pernaw & Company, Concord, NH
Madbury Commons: Pedestrian Traffic Study
January 15, 2014

<https://www.ci.durham.nh.us/sites/default/files/fileattachments/planning_board/page/17721/pedestrian_traffic_study.pdf>

Excerpts:

- 1) ...The Madbury Commons project will provide housing for 525 students and approximately 35,000 sf of office space. On-site parking for students is minimal, as students are encouraged to walk or use transit.
- 2) According to the Traffic Impact Assessment prepared by UNH Campus Planning, the **Thursday midday peak hour period from 12:00 to 1:00 PM** was utilized for evaluating pedestrian/bicycle demand.
- 3) ...The 525 students that will occupy Madbury Commons are expected to generate approximately 7,350 pedestrian trips on a daily basis. This estimate is based on **four classes per day, a lunch trip, a dinner trip and an evening social trip for each student**. Of these, approximately 520 pedestrian trips (arrivals plus departures) are expected to occur during the midday peak hour (12:00 to 1:00 PM) period.

In addition, and notably, the Pernaw report includes recommendations "where pedestrian mobility and safety can be improved."

2) Vanasse & Associates, Inc., Andover, MA 01810
Orion Student Housing: Access and Circulation Assessment
October 31, 2013

<https://www.ci.durham.nh.us/sites/default/files/fileattachments/planning_board/page/14531/orion_access_and_circulation_assessment_103113.pdf>

Excerpts (Orion):

- 1) The Thursday evening peak-hour for pedestrian activity generally occurs between 11:15 PM and 12:15 AM, with the Saturday evening peak-hour for pedestrian activity generally occurring between 10:30 and 11:30 PM
- 2) **The highest volume of pedestrian activity was observed to occur during the Thursday evening peak-hour**

Sincerely yours,

Robin