

September 12, 2018

Re: Proposed Amendments for the Downtown

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board,

It is difficult to forget that not long ago we were considering amending our ZO to exclude mixed-use (i.e. more student housing) downtown. It is also difficult to forget that in May of 2017, during the Future Land Use Community Forum, there was overwhelming sentiment that residents did not want more student housing downtown. In fact, in the Future Land Use Community Forum Summary, Peggy Kieschnick wrote: **“We are very clear that we do not support additional student housing!”** (It is interesting to note, the final Future Land Use Chapter, adopted in January of 2018, is silent on the topic of student housing downtown. I find this curious.

The timing of these draft amendments seems odd given that we just adopted our 10-year vision in our Future Land Use Chapter in January 2018 which makes no recommendation for more student housing downtown. We are also just on the cusp of knowing the fate of the Mill Plaza redevelopment. It appears that we are likely to be adding 330 additional student beds downtown, student beds which most residents have little appetite for. So it is interesting that we now find ourselves presented with a draft proposal to stimulate development of student apartments downtown. Shouldn't we be waiting to see how the downtown absorbs these additional Mill Plaza students? How will these new amendments impact the Mill Plaza should the current proposal not be approved?

If the Planning Board can get beyond the ethical dilemma of ignoring the sentiments expressed by residents at the Future Land Community Use Forum after bringing residents through an extensive Master Plan process, how do we move forward and what makes sense?

I will be the first to admit that some of our downtown space is underutilized. We keep hearing that residents want a vibrant, resident-friendly downtown. Yet in the Future Land Use Chapter, it also states that residents want human scale buildings, 2-3 stories tall. When speaking about the Downtown specifically, the Chapter recommends restaurant, retail, and services on the ground floor with office or multi-unit on the upper stories, with the basic fabric of our downtown composed of 3-story buildings (a fourth story allowed *only under certain circumstances*). The Chapter reinforces the community's desire to retain our small town character with human scale buildings. These recommendations do not translate into Main Street and Madbury Road lined with 4-story buildings-which will be the result if we permit 4 stories.

Of the models presented by the downtown redevelopment group, I believe the only justifiable model is the one with first floor retail, second floor office, third floor residential. I like that model because it honors what was recommended in the Future Land Use Chapter and it provides the town with 2 stories of commercial space while minimizing the number of floors of

student apartments. This strikes me as a reasonable compromise given that we need the student apartments to finance redevelopment.

We hear over and over again that both landlords and townspeople prefer a vision of the downtown where fewer undergraduate students live and more graduate students and young professionals live. If we are serious about shifting the balance of downtown residents, it is critical that we design apartments to attract our desired demographic. That means not building any more 3 and 4 bedroom apartments! If the Planning Board decides to move forward with these amendments, they should specify the following:

- **one and two bedroom apartments only (that would appeal to graduate students and young professionals)**
- **human-scale buildings no taller than 3 stories**
- **first floor retail, second floor office, third floor residential.**

As for square footage per occupant, we should determine the largest possible size one- and two-bedroom apartments that would allow the project to obtain financing. It should be no smaller than 300 sq. feet per occupant, possibly inching closer to 350 or 400 sq. feet per occupant. A larger, nicer one- or two-bedroom apartment is more apt to attract the demographic we are seeking.

As for the flexibility of spaces, the market will drive this. I don't see any harm in allowing this by Conditional Use, though it is hard to imagine a business or office wanting to share an internal wall with students.

In the Parting Words of Advice from the Future Land Use Community Forum Summary: "Take a slow, thoughtful approach to development." Given UNH's shrinking population, shouldn't we be undertaking a market analysis prior to adopting a version of these amendments?

Sincerely,

Beth Olshansky