

September 25, 2018

Planning Board  
8 Newmarket Road  
Durham, NH 03824

RE: *Public Hearing – Downtown Zoning Amendment re Dwelling Unit Density*

Greetings,

At the last meeting of the Planning Board, I urged caution about moving forward quickly with the proposed density-related zoning amendment that is the subject of tonight's public hearing.

I divide my comments in this letter into two parts: (1) Constrain unit size to a maximum of two bedrooms; and (2) Take steps to encourage "true" community vitality.

### **Part One: Constrain unit size to a maximum of two bedrooms**

As Councilor Lawson correctly pointed out at the September 12th meeting, the UNH campus already houses thousands of students. He was perhaps implying that there is no way to tell whether intrusive behavior can be attributed to residents of downtown or of the campus. What we do know is the following: More = more. Whether students live in dorms or apartments, some will spend time socializing downtown on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights, some will wend their way into the neighborhoods, some will behave poorly, and residents in downtown neighborhoods will bear the cost. And if larger apartments are more likely to be the site of gatherings than smaller apartments and perhaps lead to disruptive behavior, then it would be a good idea to limit the appeal by constraining allowable apartment configurations to a maximum of two bedrooms.

### **Part Two: Take steps to encourage "real" community vitality**

We repeatedly state that student housing is the economic driver for redevelopment that benefits the community. There are two sides to that equation. I don't think I'm alone in believing it's time to focus on the right-hand side, i.e., community benefits.

For at least the past decade, we have been eager to derive the financial benefits from the low-hanging fruit of student housing. So far, we have primarily realized an increase in property taxes (which has helped to offset municipal improvements such as a new library) and the replacement of decrepit buildings. The latter has led to safer living conditions, reduced demand on our emergency response resources, and enhanced the aesthetics of our downtown. That said, we have been markedly less willing to put effort into figuring ways to offset the day-to-day impacts of large numbers of young adult residents in our midst—or how to leverage to our advantage the eagerness of out-of-town developers to profit from this opportunity.

In iteration after iteration of our Master Plans, residents have expressed a desire for fewer students and a more walkable and vibrant downtown. Vibrancy is not simply a measure of quantity, that is, how many people are bustling around downtown, but of quality: **who wants to spend time there, doing what, and how do these people interact with each other?** We need to go beyond replacing antiquated buildings on underdeveloped sites. This is where urban planning comes in.

**I urge the Board to look at the proposed zoning density-related amendment not in isolation but in conjunction with other land use regulations (whether zoning or site plan) that might lead to community-building.**

Ideas include:

- 1) Increase setback requirements to allow for sidewalk widths that encourage socializing, including allowing for outdoor cafe tables. (Jenkins Court is a prime example of a location that should have required wider sidewalks.)
- 2) Explore how to require developers to contribute pedestrian and bicyclist amenities to the streetscape, e.g., benches, plantings, lighting, bus stops, sidewalk upgrades, covered walkways, bike parking, better growing space for trees that provide respite from a harsh sun.

We can—and should—be thoughtfully creative in asking for community benefiting contributions directly related to development impacts.

Sincerely yours,

*Robin Mower*