

Durham Planning Board Hearing, June 12, 2019

Malcolm Sandberg

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and thank you Board Members for your close attention to this important issue. I am grateful for your having organized the informative tour of the potentially impacted sections of Durham Point Road last week.

There were important takeaways from the tour.

We learned the Eversource proposal will maintain a vegetation-free corridor around the proposed, new electrical wires. We learned the corridor will be a much-enlarged, vegetation-free “box” rising 15 feet above the top wires, 10 feet below the wires and 8 feet to either side of the wires and will be maintained as such every four years in the future. We learned the proposed wires will be supported by new poles up to 50 feet tall and that the old, existing poles are only about 30-35 feet above ground, up to 20 feet higher than at present. We learned that Eversource thinks the old poles, some nearly 50 years old, should be replaced.

When asked, multiple times, in multiple ways, “What happens when a property owner or the Town denies your request to trim, prune or remove trees?”, we learned that Eversource engineers, will have to “engineer around it”.

Much of the Eversource presentation this evening focused on what they describe as a plan to increase safety, reliability and resilience of service with emphasis on the value and advantages of 3-phase power. Also, they have tried to appease concerned board members and residents by decreasing the number of trees to be removed from 137 to, now, 48 trees. This sounds good; however, regardless of the number of trees to be removed or trimmed, the proposed vegetation-free corridor in the sky is still at least 16 feet by 25 feet at the top of 50-foot poles! To be clear, focusing on the pros and cons of 3-phase power serves only to obscure the actual issue before the Planning Board tonight. Mr. Chairman, I ask that you make every effort to guide the discussion this evening to focus specifically on the scenic impact of clearing

a 16 foot x 25 foot aerial corridor at the top of poles, opening the tree canopy to the sky, and the impact of that corridor on the scenic character of the road.

An overwhelming majority of Durham voters, in 1973, designated Durham Point Road and Bay Road “scenic” under New Hampshire RSA 231:157-158. It is that “scenic” designation that requires Eversource to seek and obtain Planning Board permission to remove and trim trees in the public right of way and requires Eversource to have permission to trim or remove trees on private property. That requirement exists for good reason.

The Planning Board is charged with the responsibility of ensuring that alterations to trees and stone walls on scenic Durham Point Road do not destroy the scenic character of the road. That’s your job. There can be no doubt in any thoughtful person’s mind that this Eversource proposal to penetrate and open the existing tree canopy to the sky will create an enlarged, aerial vegetation-free corridor, and will drastically alter the scenic characteristics of the road.

This is NOT permitted. Eversource knows it. The Planning Board knows it. If anyone thinks Durham Point should not be protected as “scenic”, that discussion belongs before the Town Council, not here tonight.

It’s the extreme change in height and the enlarged vegetation-free corridor that will destroy the scenic road. This Board should restrict pruning, trimming and tree removal to practices as have been carried out for the existing infrastructure, quite successfully, for nearly 50 years. That practice, after all, is what, in large part, led to the road being declared “scenic” in the first place. To my knowledge, that utility practice has never faced objection from the Planning Board and there has been little, if any, objection by property owners.

This not an either/or situation nor is it a take-or-leave-it situation. We can have improved reliability of service and we can maintain the scenic character of the road. You can and should deny this application knowing that Eversource can and will “engineer around it” and they will return with a plan that meets the Town’s requirements.

Please do so. Thank you.