

Date: November 28, 2022

To: Durham Planning Board,

Re: Workforce Housing Ordinance

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board,

Due to a work commitment on Wednesday evening, I may not be able to attend the Housing Ordinance Public Hearing. I hope that the Planning Board will choose to keep the Public Hearing open to allow more members of the public to better understand and digest what is being proposed. The proposal, as it now stands, will have far-reaching impacts throughout our community. Heather Grant's presentation provided some background on the proposed changes but did not actually explain what the proposed changes are nor did she address the potential impacts. Many citizens may choose not to weigh in at this first public hearing for lack of fully grasping the recommended changes or their actual impacts.

Unanswered questions

Taken as a whole, the proposed changes represent a re-design of almost our entire Town. While many residents are sympathetic to the need for more affordable housing, is this drastic approach really what residents want? Many unanswered questions must be answered before any serious discussion takes place. To name a few: What will the potential impacts be to the character of each residential zone, our environment, traffic, schools, taxes, etc.? How do these recommendations align with the Town Council's and the community's sustainability goals? How do the proposed changes align with the principles of Smart Growth in the Master Plan (which call for "increasing density in the downtown area and restricting development in the peripheral areas of town.")?

Broad-brush approach is too far-reaching

My personal reaction to the proposed ordinance is, frankly, one of alarm. The proposal recommends sweeping changes in nearly every district of our town. This "broad-brush approach" will certainly increase density in every residential zone and many commercial zones. It will reduce environmental protections, all the while not necessarily producing workforce housing. Indeed, it is truly a realtor's and developer's dream come true.

During informal discussions, Councilor and PB/housing taskforce member Sally Tobias, who is also a realtor, has noted that the proposed changes will definitely create more housing, and we need more housing (according to Sally), but she has also acknowledged that the proposed changes will not necessarily produce more workforce or affordable housing.

To be clear, I am not in favor of redesigning Durham to accommodate more high-cost housing than it is already zoned for. Given that we live in a market-driven society, I do not understand how the end result of this proposal will be anything other than a lot more expensive housing, with perhaps a small sprinkling of workforce housing. I believe this is the wrong approach to creating workforce—or even affordable—housing.

Unique challenges of a college town

I notice that several people on the committee are relatively new to Durham and a few who bring expertise about workforce housing do not live in Durham. Many of the towns referenced as models for affordable housing zoning changes are not college towns.

Those of us who have lived in Durham for a long time understand the unique challenges faced by a college town. Durham has spent decades trying to draw student renters out of the downtown neighborhoods. While the idea of encouraging accessory dwelling units (ADUs) in the residential zones may seem like a good idea, I cannot help but think that more ADUs will draw more students back into the neighborhoods. Given the thousands of students looking for housing, what makes the committee think these ADUs will not be rented by students? Additionally, who is most likely to build ADUs? My guess is investors, those trying to maximize profits from student rentals. Could these ADUs house nonstudents? Certainly. But enough students will be willing and able to pay more to squeeze others out of the market. And whoever invests in building ADUs will likely want to earn back their investment and maximize their profit, thus rent to students.

Dramatic changes to character of each residential zone

As I noted earlier, the proposed ordinance will alter the character of every residential zone. Most Durham homeowners have purchased their homes based on the characteristics of the neighborhood they have chosen. The recommended changes will forever alter those characteristics. For instance, many of us who moved to the R and RC zones did so because we value a more pastoral setting and the natural beauty created by open space. We invested our savings in our homes because we enjoy the ability to walk, run, or bicycle along Durham's backroads. We feel renewed passing by an open field, even if in a car. The recommended changes have the potential of creating new dense developments in R and RC that will have the characteristics of RB or even downtown with its multi-unit buildings. Under the proposed ordinance, RB will begin to look and feel more like RA, decreasing lots sizes, doubling density on the same lot, and creating many of the same student rental problems that plague residents living in RA.

Consider impacts of pending UNH enrollment cliff

Over the last decade Durham has approved well over 2000 beds for college students. First, we agreed to develop pastoral open space on the outskirts of town to move students away from the downtown. Then, we decided to build large student housing complexes downtown to move students out of our neighborhoods. When the nationwide college enrollment cliff becomes a reality in 2025 (based on documented birthrate demographics), many of these student housing units, especially those on the outskirts of town, will become vacant.

I have spoken with managers at The Lodges and The Cottages. They currently do and will continue to rent to nonstudents. They are already advertising bargain prices for next year—which hints at concerns about filling their housing (thus the reduced rates). When the enrollment cliff actually arrives, the cottages and duplexes at both locations could easily become alternative housing for young professionals and families. There is a whole new existing source of housing which I wonder if the Housing Taskforce considered?

After allowing dense development in these once-pastoral outskirts of town, I resent now being told we need to build duplexes and multi-unit developments in R and RC.

Existing contribution to affordable housing has been overlooked

I also think we need to acknowledge that in building so much student housing in Durham over the last decade, we have drawn students out of lower-cost housing not only in our downtown neighborhoods, but also in neighboring towns. By doing this, Durham has already significantly contributed to the availability of workforce housing in the region. This needs to be recognized.

Careful consideration of impacts to schools needed

Also not addressed in these sweeping recommendations are impacts to our school system. Dr. Morse recently described the school system as being “at capacity.” I don’t understand how the drafters of these recommendations can overlook very real impacts on our schools. Are they aware, for instance, that every classroom at Moharimet and Mast Way is currently being used? Or that all classrooms at the two elementary schools are very close to capacity now, as defined by district class size policy? The very real impacts of these sweeping increases in density on our school system and our taxes has not been addressed. It needs to be given serious consideration.

A recommendation

Rather than put the community through months of additional, unnecessary angst by combing through and discussing this document line by line, I urge the PB to reject this proposed ordinance outright. It is far too sweeping and makes little sense for a college town.

My recommendations: ask the Housing Taskforce Committee to gather facts and figures from the school district, calculate impacts to our schools, our neighborhoods, our taxes. Then come back with a modest plan to create targeted workforce housing in one small area of town.

In keeping with the “density transect” and the principles of Smart Growth described in our Master Plan and aligned with Durham’s sustainability goals, consider proposing the creation of a transitional zone close to the center of town that includes the Mill Plaza and the two southern Church Hill lots. This new zone or Planned Unit Development (PUD) could be dedicated to workforce housing and would exclude student rentals using the mechanism described in the proposal. Such a plan would also serve to establish a much-needed buffer between the downtown student housing apartments and the Faculty Neighborhood. A proposal such as this would meet the goals of the committee by broadening the types of housing available in Durham without destroying what makes Durham an attractive community to live in.

Sincerely,

Beth Olshansky
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