

Comments to Durham Planning Board, December 14, 2022; Proposed Housing Amendments

Good evening,

I am Carden Welsh, live at 3 Fairchild Drive, and tonight I speak for myself as a citizen, not as a council member.

I would like to thank the members of the housing task force for taking on this truly daunting task, as well as the members of the public who have spoken before me. Dennis, Judith, Al Howland, Beth and others have made excellent points, and I will endeavor not to repeat things that they have said, except where I try to further move the discussion along.

The key starting point, as has been mentioned by many, is that it would be very helpful to determine succinctly and in writing, what is the objective of the proposed changes. I did attend the meeting of the housing commission this past Monday, and I did listen to your previous meeting, and there still seems to be confusion as to what we are attempting to accomplish. Is it simply that we want to build more dwelling units so that more people can move to Durham – I have heard that expressed. Is it that the state has decided that housing is needed so we should provide whatever we can? Is it to provide Workforce housing specifically, or low-cost housing or attainable housing or life cycle housing or more diversity of housing? Is it to provide a more vibrant downtown? I did not get a consistent answer, so I think it is important to get a specific, written objective that people agree upon, and I think it was Dennis who mentioned that we then need to build a general consensus behind this objective, if we are to effectively move forward.

That said, let me make a modest proposal. I think that there are three key items that should be in that objective. One is that we should only encourage housing that is consistent with our existing commitment to the General Council of Mayors, which is to take actions to reduce our carbon footprint. At a minimum we need to encourage more environmentally-sensitive housing than is currently available. In fact very specifically, our carbon action plan asks for efforts to “evaluate zoning changes that allow for a broader variety of modestly-sized, affordably-priced energy-efficient housing”.

Second, housing that facilitates life cycle availability should be encouraged, better allowing both starter families to move into town, and downsizing seniors to remain in town.

And third, perhaps most importantly, our objective should be to adopt changes that will serve to retain and enhance the character, the ethos, the vibe of Durham as a New England small town academic community

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- 1) that places a high value on education,
- 2) that values the environment,
- 3) that values a very special, unusual closeness to nature, and
- 4) that values its agricultural roots,

And importantly, all of this needs to be done without encouraging the building of evermore student housing in town.

This is difficult, no question. However, for instance, denser dwelling units like condos or apartments or duplexes with smaller footprints, in the right location, that will not be taken over by students, would be desired. Effective conservation subdivisions, with smaller houses on smaller footprints but surrounded by woodlands, could be acceptable. They could check all of the boxes. Alternatively, putting more large

single family houses in the rural zone would be problematic, as it could add to our carbon footprint and would not increase the diversity of housing that we already have, and may harm the character of the town, making it more typically suburban, in comparison to what we are trying to preserve.

To move forward, I think we all agree that looking at all of the proposed changes is too large and time-consuming a task. In fact, the housing task force described it as a “Christmas list” of things to consider. I would suggest, as a kind of modification of what Richard Kelly was suggesting, and following up on Paul’s comment about a more focused effort, that you ask the housing task force, or you decide amongst yourselves, what to prioritize amongst the many proposals that have been made. Perhaps you start with conservation subdivisions, then ADUs, then workforce housing perhaps in conjunction with over-55 housing, then duplexes. Whatever; you or the task force decide.

Once you prioritize, these specific proposals can be more thoroughly addressed, either by the housing commission or by a group specified by the planning board. This group can review the more limited proposal in detail, and answer many of the considerations that have been raised. What area of the town does this cover, does a map show the amount and location of open land, what part of the community will be impacted and how would it likely be impacted, how many new units are likely to be built and what is their attractiveness as student housing, what is the likely impact on the school district, and what are the potential “unintended consequences” of these changes to our ordinances.

Once you have this information, you, the planning board, can go forward with your typically very thoughtful and positive recommendations and changes.

One last point; I don't think we need to feel pushed on this in regard to timing. As has been brought up by several people, Durham has been way ahead of the game in terms of accommodating population growth. I took a look at population figures provided by ELMI, a federally funded NH state agency. They show that the state's population, from the year 2000 to the year 2019 (the latest available comprehensive town data) has increased by 10%. I checked the 2000-2019 population growth of comparable communities in our area, and found that over the same time as the state population grew by 10%, the population of Portsmouth increased by 5%, Exeter by 9%, Newmarket by 13%, Dover by 19%, and Durham by 28%, or almost 3X the growth rate of the state. So, I think that we have earned the right to take the time to do a thorough job with our zoning, that reflects the needs and desires of Durham, as opposed to the needs of the late-to-the party state.

And in conclusion, I would like to thank you, the members of the planning board for everything you do. This is one of the most complicated, time-consuming committees that we have, but also one of the most important in terms of ensuring that Durham is and remains a fantastic place to live.

Thank you very much.