

**Comments to the Durham Planning Board:
Public Hearing - Housing Amendments
Dennis Meadows; November 30, 2022**

I strongly favor policies that would make Durham housing more diverse and affordable. I thank the members of the Durham Housing Task Force for their efforts to achieve those goals. Because I want them to succeed, I suggest that you remand their proposal and give them time to fix its problems.

Their preliminary proposal is a massive revision of Durham's current zoning code. They suggest over 150 additions and 250 deletions. To understand what this might mean I read a 120-page report published last year by NH Housing, the public corporation established by the state in 1981 to promote, finance, and support affordable housing in New Hampshire. That report is a 10-year retrospective study describing the lessons learned in many NH towns that responded to the 2008 NH law promoting affordable housing in the state.

In the report's ten detailed municipal case studies three lessons stand out.

First, before proposing innovative new housing initiatives in a town it is essential to educate voters and build political consensus. Second, successful projects involve partnerships. Lesson number three is that ignoring the first two lessons can provoke a political backlash that leaves the town less likely and less able to support innovative housing initiatives in the future.

The Durham Task Force recommendations do not yet reflect those first two lessons. To avoid a backlash, I recommend that the Planning Board table its discussion about their proposal until they have had time to do that.

More thought is required in three areas:

First the current Task Force solution is disproportionate to the problem.

Only a few acres are actually required to provide more affordable and diverse housing in a town. In Dover, for example, Farm Wood Village is 159 affordable lots on 53 acres; Cottages at Back River Road will offer 44 units on 7 acres. Hanover, NH, built 120 housing units on a small parcel. Conway has 156 units on 37 acres. Londonderry has 240 units on a 25 acre site. Here in Durham, Bagdad Woods offers over 100 apartments on just a few acres. There are many other examples.

At a recent Council meeting Heather said we just need "little itty bitty steps." I agree with her. It is just not necessary to alter zoning on all of Durham's 11,000

acres to provide additional housing for a few. Let us define a small new zone and define for it regulations that will promote a different mode of development in an appropriate area of town.

Indeed, the widely dispersed single units that would result from the Task Force's proposed zoning changes would mainly attract high-income buyers. One task force member wrote, "These zoning revisions might not result in low-cost housing." Another has said about the proposal, the houses will "not necessarily be cheaper".

Second, more thought is required to reflect the unique features of Durham. I'll mention five essential questions for us. 1: Since 2008 Durham has built 2030 new student beds. How do they affect our obligations to further expand the stock of low-cost housing on the Seacoast? 2: Manufactured housing costs 60% less per sq. foot than individually built homes. Why were all the bans on manufactured housing left untouched in the Durham zoning code? 3: Half the affordable housing sold so far this year in Durham has been bought by investors, not by workers. What new policies will ensure that low-cost housing is actually sold to those who need it? 4: What costs will this increased housing impose on existing Durham residents? I believe we should consider paying those costs, but we cannot make any honest commitment to do so, until we have an estimate what they are. The 5th question: How can we build lower-cost housing that does not attract students?

Third, and finally, more thought is required to ensure that the final proposal does not place unreasonable demands on the Planning Board.

The preliminary Task Force proposal doubles the number of uses listed as CU. Thus adopting the new zoning regulations will enormously increase the amount of the Board members will have to spend listening to the developers' lawyers tell us what is appropriate, feasible, customary, adequate, practical, effective, and reasonable. Our current experience with the Church Hill parking lot shows how much fun that is. (NOT)

The October 3 Town Council meeting acknowledged the value of the Task Force effort, recognized the many complexities in its job, and voted to give it another year to address them. The Task Force's goals are important, it is a complex task, and they do need another year.