

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE PLANNING BOARD ON HOUSING ZONING PROPOSAL
NOV.30,2022 Judith Spang. 55 WISWALL ROAD, DURHAM

I have worked as a land use planner for 40 years, including two decades in the NH Legislature, working on land use issues that involve the balancing of housing, economic development, municipal infrastructure and the environment.

I have participated in legislation and legislative commissions addressing the problems of balancing housing, economic development, municipal infrastructure and the environment. I have also worked on task forces and committees in Durham that address housing and economic development here.

I am writing from the perspective of a land use and community planner. The proposal put before us by the dedicated Housing Task Force is troubling to me because of several assumptions underlying it.

First, the assumption that more housing will result in lower property taxes. We have lived here for 40 years, seeing significant growth, yet our taxes have grown exponentially. Even with the large student housing units built in town, taxes have not fallen. More housing has resulted in more demand for services, from roads to water supply. This is typical –studies find that increases in housing have resulted in higher property taxes in communities statewide.

Second, Professor England's analysis of the relationship between population growth and school costs is not specific to Durham. It ignores marginal cost principles. It does not take into account such towns where an increase of a handful of students may cause a school district close to capacity to have to add additional classrooms, teachers, school busses, etc. Nor does it take into account the elasticity of parent demand.... How large a class size will be tolerated? Not much, according to previous experiences at Oyster River.

Third, school taxes are not the only factor in our high property taxes. Legislators and communities utilizing the Smart City model note that infrastructure costs planned and paid for in the short run are the tip of the iceberg. Over 20 years, those additional roads, bridges, sewer and water capacity will require expansion and maintenance. Maintenance costs are seldom seen as the result of previous growth, so growth is not equated with those higher property taxes.

Fourth, The Housing Task Force also assumes that our downtown needs revitalization through inflow of population. Durham once had a movie theater, book store, Five and Dime Store, men's clothing store and an active Durham Art Association. The result of the town's residential growth over the past decades? A bustling downtown awash with student commerce, with very limited offerings for the rest of us. The market has spoken.

In my mind, a good land use plan considers the needs of the community, and then consideration of location where those needs can best be accommodated, and the physical, social, economic and environmental factors to be thoroughly considered in meeting them.

The proposal before us only focusses on a popular understanding of the need for housing. Does it ask, Is Durham a good location for that, given the insatiable student demand for housing?

Further, as Councilor Neal Neiman and I found, while the center of town is the best location for affordable housing, the majority of University land holdings close to the center limit Durham's suitability for it.

Socially, I believe the residents of Durham are not skeptical of workforce housing for the social xenophobic reasons that constrains the development of workforce housing in many places. But the community's passion for and commitment to open space and environmental protection create a social disjuncture with the proposed increase in density in lower density and rural areas. (Our Masterplan is clear on that.)

Economically, the high cost of land here tips the profitability of development to student housing. Is Durham prepared to undertake an Affordable Housing Program, with tax incentives, bonds and regional transfer of development rights? A tall order.

This proposal addresses only making land available and hopes the market will provide the low income housing. It is like giving someone a car without the key.

There is a certain self-effacement underlying Durham's approach to affordable housing. But Durham has nothing to apologize for. We sop up hundreds of students in several large multi-unit structures in and outside town. Our two large senior housing projects have released scores of single family houses to the housing supply.

It should also be appreciated that instead of being developed with a proliferation of housing projects, a laudable amount of our open spaces protecting Great Bay and the Lamprey Rivers have been conserved for the benefit of the region.

Kudos to the thoughtful planning in our Masterplan and initiatives to zone to protect sensitive areas. Any radical deviation from them should be done very purposefully and sensitively.

Let's not throw the baby out with the bath water here!