

December 13, 2022

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board,

This letter concerns the November 30, 2022 Planning Board hearing in regard to a proposed revision of town zoning with the intent to foster more affordable housing.

In one sentence, I share the concerns put forth by the first 4-5 speakers making public comments expressing reservations with the proposed revisions presented to the Planning Board. I was particularly impressed with the points made by Judith Sprang and Jay Gooze.

I do believe that the lack of smaller more “affordable” housing is a challenge for future growth of the state and it is a reasonable goal for towns to encourage or help create such housing. I support Durham pursuing such an initiative if done with a process encouraging public input so the end result has broad majority support.

The committee that proposed the changes surely gave them serious consideration but I did not understand if there were specific, reasonable and achievable goals articulated with the proposed changes. I understand in theory all the widespread changes proposed should help create more housing. However, given the breadth of the changes proposed it is hard to believe the results would be at all predictable.

Given our relatively free market, builders and developers do their best to maximize their investment profit and hence prices on development of new housing. Likewise, individual home owners given any new opportunity and desire to create additional housing on existing developed properties will also attempt to maximize their property value and income. In my opinion our free-market economics may or may not produce the less expensive housing products most in need.

With these assumptions I believe that the introduction of widespread changes to the zoning ordinance will create an environment ripe for many unintended consequences and possible discord among property owners and not really assure meaningful production of the desired less expensive housing most needed. If the changes allow a new 15-unit condo development somewhere of 2,200 sf units priced at \$600,000 I’m not sure that helps the assumed goal.

I would encourage that rather than start with a debate of the proposed zoning revisions, set them aside for a bit and develop a goals setting process to consider what specific unmet housing needs are reasonable and achievable for Durham to pursue.

Develop public consensus; is the goal more housing for young single people like one-bedroom apartments or is there more need for young working couples to find a small duplex or town house condo? What about retirees looking for small 2–3-bedroom ranch homes or stacked flats. How many units of what type are feasible? With consensus on some realistic goals then seek to target zoning changes and incentives to achieve the goals.

I believe a targeted approach is much preferred over scrambling a large set of zoning ordinances that evolved over time and then just hoping that the desired outcomes will occur.

Thank you for all your volunteer time on the Board.

Respectfully,

Mike Lehrman
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Copy to; Town Planner