

November 18, 2024

Dear Members of the Durham Town Council,

Thank you for this opportunity to provide public input on the proposed Workforce Housing Overlay District. Between the Housing Task Force and the Planning Board, I know that a great deal of time and thought has been spent on this effort.

As I recall, the concept of a Workforce Housing Development was first presented to the public as a vision for a new single neighborhood on a particularly well-placed parcel of land tucked in the woods off of Rte. 4 across from Harmony Homes. Interest from a local developer, John Randolph, who owns and operates Harmony Homes, made this proposal particularly intriguing. Because Randolph had built a neighborhood of tiny houses in Dover recently, many assumed that this new development of perhaps 100 homes would be similar, thus reducing the potential burden on the schools.

As the discussions evolved, the concept morphed or at least was clarified by the Randolphs. Mr. Randolph is interested in developing a neighborhood of 1-, 2- and 3-bedroom workforce housing rental units. The number of units increased from 100 to 200+ (which I understand may be necessary to make the finances work).

The PB was advised by the Town Attorney that rezoning just one parcel would be considered spot zoning so the PB has designated a much wider area of land between Rt. 4 and Rt. 108. The next Workforce Housing Map presented by the PB also includes a large swath of land, nearly 75% of ORLI. The public was told that this was to meet a State requirement that every town must set aside 50% of its residential area for workforce housing. I was told that the PB was really not interested in having this large area become workforce housing but was doing this to meet State regulations. I was assured that the ordinance would be “sunseted” prior to development in this area getting out of hand.

I recognize the good intentions behind this effort, but here are my objections:

- 1) **I object to the concept of zoning for what we don't want and promising to sunset the ordinance prior to unwanted proposals coming forward.** The Mill Plaza Proposal should come to mind—a warning to us all—in which the Town was just hours late in posting an announcement for an ordinance change. This resulted in a 7-8 year battle with Colonial Durham, and unnecessary expense to the Town, not to mention the emotional wellbeing of engaged citizens.
- 2) **Rather than run counter to our Master Plan, which recommends concentrating density toward the center of town, protecting our rural gateways in ORLI, and principles of [Smart Growth](#), let's focus on workforce housing in the Commercial Core.** Let's not throw away a decades-long commitment to Smart Growth and orderly planning developed by hundreds of Durham residents in a rash attempt to quickly meet mandates that may or may not apply to Durham. (Given that Durham has already spent

the last decade-plus approving thousands of student beds both downtown and outside of town, some argue that Durham has already made a significant contribution by opening up affordable housing in our downtown neighborhoods and those of surrounding communities as students move into these new housing options.)

I understand that the Housing Task Force is working on proposed zoning amendments to encourage workforce housing in our downtown. That is in keeping with our Master Plan, principles of Smart Growth, and Todd's excellent recommendations in a letter dated August 7, 2024. **Let us develop a plan that makes sense for Durham and is aligned with our values and decades of planning.**

- 3) **The current large workforce housing overlay area, generous as it is, does not consider realistic impacts to town and school services. Our physical school buildings (especially at the "already at capacity" elementary buildings) do not offer a bottomless pit of space for incoming students. There are actually very real physical limits before new construction is sure to be needed. This is another reason why "throwing in ORLI" for good measure seems unwise.**

Late last spring, I witnessed Jim Morse, following a pre-meeting with Michael, graciously offer his parting farewell to the District by giving his blessing to a new workforce housing neighborhood with a "We can make it work" assurance. Easy enough to say with only one month left to his term. At a subsequent OR School Board meeting, he discovered that parents of the 17 Moharimet kindergarteners slated to be moved to Mast Way to avoid overcrowding at Moharimet revolted and the School Board was forced to abandon Jim's solution. The alternative became to turn the art room at Moharimet into a classroom, removing it from circulation for 300 students. This, of course, is not a sustainable solution for long-term overcrowding as it offers only one additional classroom, whether or not one acknowledges the negative impacts to the art program. Subsequently, there has already been discussion about needing to build an addition onto Mast Way should student numbers increase (because there is no room to build at Moharimet).

**Residents need to understand that even a single 200-unit Workforce Housing Development in the Oyster River District (known across the State for its excellence in education) will draw more than the existing data-determined .5 students per household.** While the average number of students per household in the District may well be .5 overall, that data is derived from surveying our housing inventory within our well-established neighborhoods.

Consider this. Those of us who have lived in the District for decades may have moved here originally because of the schools. We bought up the existing available housing stock slowly as seniors moved out after having stayed in the community for several decades. Established neighborhoods experience a natural ebb and flow of families with school-age children as families tend to move in when children are young and then stay on as empty-nesters

because they have become part of our community. (Note: These long-term residents are also homeowners for the most part, not renters.)

While I don't believe there is much data on students per household within a brand-new neighborhood within the ORCSD (i.e. when a large number of homes become available within a short period of time), I can offer one interesting data point. I believe that the newest neighborhood in Durham is located across from my house. Stonewall Way was built a little over 20 years ago. The number of children per household as of this past summer is about 2.4. Families move in when their kids are young and tend to move out after graduation because the taxes are high. (Note: Taxes in Durham are cheaper than paying for private school.) This one data point should cause us to reconsider our projected incoming student numbers for a brand-new development within the ORCSD. I don't believe the .50 per household number will hold in a school district so highly recognized across the State as the ORCSD. This has important implications regarding the potential fiscal impact of the current proposed overlay district. I hope the TC will take a close look at realistic fiscal impacts based on schools and town services. If 200 new 1-, 2-, and 3-bedroom homes come online within a relatively short time, how many students can we realistically expect to arrive on the doorstep of our highly ranked school system? How will town services be impacted? What are the potential tax implications? The public needs to be informed.

**Despite all of the above, I am not opposed to supporting a Workforce Housing Neighborhood on the Keefe Property.** If a large portion of the land can be conserved as required in the ordinance, the proposed neighborhood could provide much needed housing for members of the community including police, firemen, town workers, and teachers, as well as the staff at Harmony Homes and Riverwoods. This would offer a benefit to the community while also contributing to lessen the affordable housing needs in the area. *I would support this despite the fact that I do think we will need to build an addition for our elementary school students.*

**I urge the Town Council will reject the ORLI Workforce Housing Overlay and encourage the Housing Task Force to continue with its current focus on creating more workforce housing opportunities with the Commercial Core. Meanwhile let's take a serious look at potential impacts on school and town services for any proposed workforce housing proposal under consideration.**

**I believe there is wisdom in testing this new Workforce Housing Overlay District in a modest and impactful, albeit circumscribed, way before opening up half the town to the unintended consequences of a new untested ordinance.**

If I have learned one thing from following the Planning Board process closely for the last 25 years, it is that one should never underestimate the number of loopholes which even a well-thought-out ordinance contain. Let's start small. Two-hundred+ units on the Keefe property will create a neighborhood larger than the Faculty Road neighborhood. That is sizeable. That, plus more opportunities for workforce housing downtown, offer two circumscribed areas that will provide a significant amount of affordable housing without throwing out decades of thoughtful planning in Durham.

Please remove ORLI from the overlay map. We can always expand the map later on.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Beth Olshansky  
122 Packers Falls Road