

DATE: Dec. 11, 2024

FROM: Dennis Meadows
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TO: Michael Behrendt

I am delighted that after five years of being persistently a critic of major development efforts before the Planning Board, I can become a supporter. I sincerely welcome the initiative of Torrington Associates with its Mill Plaza project. It can be implemented in a way that enhances Durham while generating profits for Torrington. But both goals will be better achieved with a minor change. The design and construction of the foot path from Chesley Drive to the Mill Road should be moved from Phase 5 to Phase 1.

You indicated the current proposed timing of the walkway in your summary of the project for the Planning Board agenda, "Phase 5 – improvements to parking lot and installation of walking path along College Brook." You indicated this would occur in Spring 2026 "though it could potentially be accelerated depending on various factors." I am writing to describe the factors that justify accelerating work on the walkway from Phase 5 to Phase 1.

The walkway will yield many benefits to Torrington and the town. They should not be delayed.

Benefits for Torrington:

- reduce the risk of legal liability for pedestrians crossing the Plaza parking lot,
- enhance the aesthetics of the Plaza,
- increase pedestrian traffic to the Plaza businesses.
- generate political good will with Durham citizens, and
- enhance the appeal of the overall redevelopment to the Planning Board,

Benefits for the Town:

- create an attractive, convenient, and safe pedestrian corridor from the Faculty Neighborhood into town,
- ameliorate the aesthetic problems along the Brook,

- create a buffer between important commercial and residential areas of the town, and
- bring the land along College Brook into better compliance with the state's environmental standards.

There are at least five other reasons for moving the walkway design into Phase 1.

(1) In the TRG meeting Rich Reine suggested accelerating "this project since the Town is looking at doing work along the Chesley Drive sidewalk that lies on Town property."

(2) Separating the walkway and the parking lot will make it much easier for Torrington to reach agreement with the Planning Board.

(3) UNH is now preparing its new 10-year campus master plan. The plan assumes substantial efforts to enhance the corridor along College Brook. By announcing its plans for the walkway earlier, Torrington would create opportunities for coordination with the university and, among other impacts, ease the movement of university personnel between campus and Plaza.

(4) Including the walkway as an afterthought at the end of the project, raises the chance for conflict between its design and the parking lot layout.

(5) Finally, there is the potential issue of Torrington's obligation to comply with the legal settlement between Durham and the Plaza owners affecting the design of the Plaza. That settlement clearly states:

"The Revised Application will provide for proposed buildings and vehicular roads outside of the shoreland and wetland buffers such that variances from town ordinances are not required and the buffers are maintained by the property owner."

I believe that securing early agreement on the walkway design would eliminate the possibility that disagreements over this issue could complicate Torrington's future negotiations with the Planning Board.

Dennis Meadows