

TO: Michael Behrendt and the Durham Planning Board
FROM: Ken Corpron, John Hart, Steve Merrill
Board of Directors, Brookside Commons Condo Assn, 13 Mill Road, Durham
DATE: 1/2/25
RE: Torrington Properties' preliminary design for upgrading Mill Plaza

The Brookside Commons Condo Association at 13 Mill Road has been working on a wetlands restoration project along the south side of College Brook for seven years. We have removed over forty invasive or dying trees and over 7,000 square feet of invasive shrubs. We have been revegetating the area with native trees, shrubs, perennials and groundcovers. West of Mill Road, the University is also involved in wetlands planning and restoration work in the College Brook watershed.

As primary abutters to Mill Plaza, the residents of Brookside Commons Condo Association look forward to an upgraded appearance to the Plaza buildings and to more sensitive environmental and aesthetic treatments of the asphalt parking areas and the areas in the wetland and shoreland buffer zones along College Brook. Given the early stage of planning process, it is hoped that a number of changes can be implemented before shovels break ground. Based on the preliminary drawings presented by Torrington, we make the following observations and suggestions:

Following federal, state and local regulations, and in the spirit of building community trust and goodwill, remove existing and proposed construction from wetland and shoreland setback zones. Re-establish asphalt edge and curbing north of current location.

This increased "natural" space will allow the proposed pedestrian walkway (a great and necessary addition) to be physically and visually separated from drive and parking areas. It will also provide space for the walkway to traverse level ground and be buffered from the asphalt by plantings: The walkway will not run directly along the asphalt but will be a walk through a garden of plantings on both sides of the walk. This additional space will increase pedestrian safety and also allow amenities such as benches and picnic tables. The walk will likely increase the customer base for the Plaza businesses, providing a respite and connecting downtown with the extensive Durham trail system. Buffer plantings between the relocated asphalt and College Brook will provide a screen between the Plaza and the Faculty Neighborhood, reducing visual, light, and noise pollution. At the same time the Brook will be protected from the runoff of salt, sand, and chemicals from cars.

Regarding the several acres of asphalt remaining, it has been observed that, even on the busiest shopping days and even when over a hundred parking spaces were rented to

students, the parking lot never reached 2/3 occupancy, if that. Nonetheless, the excessive expanse of asphalt requires plowing, cleaning, crack-sealing, seal-coating, pothole repair, and eventual replacement. Asphalt has numerous negative environmental impacts, including heat-island effect; impermeability and reduced water infiltration; increased runoff including salt, sand, and chemical pollutants; and visual pollution. Reduction of asphalt will have many financial, environmental, and aesthetic benefits. Therefore, we encourage the creation and expansion, within the asphalt areas, of layered planting spaces (trees, shrubs, perennials, groundcovers); raingardens and bioswales; and people-friendly seating areas. Overall reduction in impervious surfaces will reduce the heat-island effect of asphalt, increase water percolation and filtration, protect College Brook, attract the public to the Plaza as a destination, and be a lesser financial burden to the owner.

Finally, we note that the University has been developing plans to restore and enhance the College Brook corridor. There could be opportunities for collaboration here.

Thank you for considering these observations and suggestions as Torrington Properties moves through the planning and approval process for Mill Plaza site alterations. We believe all parties are interested in a vibrant, sustainable, attractive, safe, welcoming, and environmentally sound Mill Plaza.