



Planning

Date: February 21, 2021

To: Members of the Durham City Council

From: Austin Amandolia, Chair, Durham Planning Commission

Subject: 2021 Planning Commission Annual Report

In compliance with the Planning Interlocal Agreement, I am submitting this report on behalf of the Durham City-County Planning Commission. The report covers the 2021 calendar year.

In a year that has continued to revolve around the COVID-19 pandemic, the Planning Commission continued its work to shape Durham's development to promote a more equitable Durham for all residents, particularly Black, Hispanic/Latin(a)(o)(x), Indigenous, BIPOC, and low-income residents. **Common themes in our discussions revolve around affordable housing, the climate crisis, and equitable infrastructure and transportation access.**

We recognize the many challenges our community faces. Housing is becoming increasingly unaffordable, while we grapple with the pressure to build as much as possible to address our housing shortage. The climate crisis continues to build, and while applicants are more frequently addressing environmental sustainability with innovative commitments, more wholesale change is required. Additionally, access to quality transportation, safe roads and sidewalks, and other transit-related infrastructure often depends on your zip code and/or socio-economic status. These are just a few of the challenges we face to promote a more inclusive community.

The approved Comprehensive Plan Community Goals and Objectives takes an important step in casting a new vision for Durham. The Planning Commission has continued to be active in the Comprehensive Plan development, with several members participating in the policy working groups with community members to develop new policies for the Comprehensive Plan. We also held two retreats to receive updates and provide feedback on the planning process. We will continue to do so into 2022, as we are planning to move to quarterly retreats. We are already using the Community Goals and Objectives in assessing cases, which shines a brighter light on the impact each development has on deciding whether Durham develops in an equitable manner.

The Planning Commission also made a historic accomplishment in 2021, **unanimously approving a Planning Commission-initiated resolution to update the UDO.** The resolution seeks to ensure new subdivisions have greater connectivity in order to enhance walkability and transit-oriented development. Planning Staff is now working to translate that resolution into a text amendment that will come to Planning Commission and the elected bodies. Our hope is to continue this progress as the Planning Department works towards a comprehensive UDO rewrite.

The Planning Commission and City Council held a joint meeting to discuss the Comprehensive Plan Goals and Objectives in September, the first such meeting in recent memory. This was an important step to increasing collaboration between the Planning Commission and the elected bodies, and we welcome further engagement, perhaps scheduling two regular joint meetings per year. We welcome this engagement with the BOCC as well.

The Planning Commission continues to support communities such as Walltown and Bragtown to ensure development is inclusive and does not cause displacement of these important and historic neighborhoods. In addition to our broader comprehensive planning work, the particular pressures on neighborhoods such as Walltown and Bragtown have received heightened attention. We support continued efforts to empower communities to shape how their communities grow.

The Planning Commission heard 32 land use cases in 2021, 30 of which were rezoning or FLUM amendments, two were UDO text amendments. Of the 30 rezoning/FLUM changes, 28 were within the city or concurrent with an annexation request, two of which were within the county. **The Commission recommended denial on eight cases, five of which were subsequently approved, one of which was concurred, and two which the Council has yet to see.** Of the four recommended denials that were later approved by Council, two were near unanimous votes by the Planning Commission and two were contested, with more than three people voting in favor. The Planning Commission had a total of nine contested voted in 2021.

Our meetings have remained virtual in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff continues to work diligently to maintain the virtual environment and ensure residents are able to participate. We held multiple meetings in March and April to review a backlog of cases and hold a public hearing on the Community Goals and Objectives. We did not have meetings in August and November due to lack of actionable business to conduct.

Last year also saw two highly regarded members depart from the Planning Commission. Tom Miller and Armeer Kenchen were term limited. We have also welcomed several new members, including Anthony Sease, Bruce Harrod, Zuri Williams, and Bradley Battista.

Overall, **Planning Commission is a body that has been advocating for walkable, inclusive, mixed use, affordable, and sustainable development.** As an advisory body and one of the lesser powerful Planning Commissions in the state, we can only accomplish our vision in collaboration with the elected bodies. We believe we can achieve the goals and objectives set out in the comprehensive plan by holding developers to higher standards on discretionary approvals and by amending our development regulations.

To achieve these broader changes, we need a new UDO, more intentional growth management practices, and a small area planning division. The Planning Department plays an important role in accomplishing these goals and should receive increased support to carry this vision for Durham.

The Planning Commission looks forward to working closely with citizens, staff, and elected officials to continue the work toward adopting a new Comprehensive Plan. Thank you for your support as we continue this important work for Durham.