

Verbal Public Comment — Durham Town Council

February 16, 2026

Good evening, members of the Durham Town Council. My name is Emmy Ham, UNH class of 2016, and current Executive Director of the Workforce Housing Coalition of the Greater Seacoast, a 501(c)3 charitable nonprofit organization located at 500 Market Street in Portsmouth, New Hampshire that works to educate and engage communities in the Seacoast region, including the Town of Durham, to advance diverse housing options so that everyone who works here can afford to call it home.

I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to share these comments virtually and apologize that none of our staff could be with you in person this evening given today is an observed holiday for our organization.

On behalf of our organization and our more than 65 members — many of whom live and work in Durham — I'm here to express our strong support for the proposed amendment to increase building heights in the Easterly Section of the Central Business-1 District to four stories and 50 feet.

At the outset, I want to acknowledge the broader policy context guiding housing decisions across New Hampshire. State workforce housing law makes clear that *“in every municipality that exercises the power to adopt land use ordinances and regulations, such ordinances and regulations shall provide reasonable and realistic opportunities for the development of workforce housing, including rental multi-family housing. In order to provide such opportunities, lot size and overall density requirements for workforce housing shall be reasonable.”* Modest increases in height and smart-growth density are practical tools municipalities can use to meet both this obligation and the housing needs of their communities.

While the law does not prescribe exactly how municipalities must achieve these outcomes, the role of our coalition — along with peer regional workforce housing coalitions across New Hampshire — is to support communities in identifying approaches that reflect local priorities while providing realistic opportunities for workforce housing development.

Our work is focused on the entire Seacoast region, where communities share responsibility for supporting the housing needs of hardworking families and individuals. Based on housing

production targets developed by the Strafford Regional Planning Commission, Durham's fair share of regional housing production is 256 units by 2025. However, a recently released production report from the New Hampshire Office of Planning and Development shows that only 78 units were permitted between 2020 and 2024, leaving the community significantly behind its production goals. This gap can be partially attributed to constraints on growth created by outdated zoning policies — including current height limitations in an underdeveloped downtown — which limit opportunities to create additional housing where infrastructure already exists.

This local shortfall also reflects a broader statewide pattern. Housing production in New Hampshire is geographically narrow, with a relatively small group of high-growth communities bearing the brunt of new development. In 2025, just 23 communities — representing 43.5 percent of the state's population — accounted for 63 percent of the housing built statewide. Similarly, the state's 28 designated Housing Champion communities were responsible for approving 45 percent of all housing units constructed that year. These trends underscore the importance of expanding housing opportunities across more communities so that the responsibility for meeting regional housing needs is more evenly shared.

It's also important to recognize where this recommendation came from. This proposal reflects the thoughtful work of Durham's Housing Task Force — a group of dedicated community members who came together to address the town's housing challenges through practical, locally driven solutions grounded in smart-growth principles. In fact, the Workforce Housing Coalition recently awarded the Durham Housing Task Force our Municipality of the Year Award, which recognizes sustained, results-driven leadership in addressing housing challenges at the local level. This amendment is a direct example of that leadership in action.

We also encourage the Council to consider whose voices are represented in conversations about housing growth. In communities across our region, decisions are often shaped most strongly by those who are already securely housed, while renters, young workers, families seeking their first home, and those who would like to live in the community but cannot afford to are less visible in the process. In a region facing significant workforce housing shortages, policy decisions should reflect the needs of both current and future residents so that Durham remains accessible and welcoming to people across incomes and stages of life.

We recognize that new residential units in these buildings will likely be market-rate and may attract students. However, in today's constrained housing market, any additional supply improves housing mobility for everyone. With enrollment at the University of New Hampshire declining, students already living in Durham are more likely to choose downtown housing closer to campus — which can free existing homes in surrounding neighborhoods for families, working professionals, and members of Durham's workforce who would otherwise be priced out. Limiting downtown housing does not reduce demand; it simply shifts it into lower-density neighborhoods and existing housing stock.

This proposal also supports local workers, strengthens Durham's live-work environment, and promotes sustainable growth by concentrating development near existing infrastructure, services, and transit. And importantly, increasing allowable height does not mean compromising community character — any future project must still meet Durham's architectural standards and undergo rigorous site plan review.

We encourage the Council to move forward with this amendment as a thoughtful step that balances Durham's character with its long-term goals for housing access, sustainability, and economic strength.

Thank you for your time and for your leadership.