

From: Dora Straus (#ipoduser) [mailto:dorastraus@gmail.com]
Sent: Monday, January 25, 2021 1:34 PM
To: PublicComment <PublicComment@mynewcastle.org>
Cc: TownBoard <townboard@mynewcastle.org>
Subject: Public Comment on DGEIS/FBC

Please see attached public comment on the DGEIS and associated Form Based Code.

SEVENTH PUBLIC COMMENT SUBMISSION
on the DGEIS associated with the Form Based Code (“FBC”)

Dora Straus
January 25, 2021

This is my seventh public comment concerning the DGEIS and associated FBC.

This comment supplements my prior public comments and raises additional questions and criticisms of the DGEIS.

This comment follows up on oral remarks made by town historian Gray Williams at the public hearing held on January 19, 2021. I am not an architect, but I studied architecture both as an art history major in college and in graduate school, having obtained a M.A. in art history from NYU’s Institute of Fine Arts. Even though it is many years later, I maintain a deep appreciation for the history of art, architecture and the aesthetic form. My background influenced my public comment dated November 21, 2020, in which I emphasized how the Hamlet’s community and aesthetic character will be destroyed when the historic houses lining King Street hill are razed and replaced with apartment buildings under the FBC.

I cannot understand why the Town would want to enact a zoning code that limits builders to one of six “permitted” historical architectural styles. This “form based code” approach is narrow-minded and uncreative. It seems to be the consultants’ attempt to “play it safe” with appearance, as a counterbalance to the adverse aesthetic impact of massively increasing the size of buildings under the FBC due to the allowance of raised heights and broadened widths.

The FBC’s limited prescription of styles will stifle the independence of vision of any architect hired to design a new building. It will just lead to pedestrian, large-scale suburban structures trying to mimic a given historic style via a watered down “formula,” resulting only in

something *pseudo*. This is why a form based code is *not* the right choice for a small town like ours.

The FBC will not result in a “charming” small town landscape. The authenticity of the various prescribed historical styles will never be effectively captured because modern building materials, components and codes are not the same as they were in ages past. Elemental details found in real historic examples will either be lost or appear hackneyed. Additionally, the scale of building size for the six referenced historical styles would have been much smaller had they been built in the Hamlet at the time of their respective eras, compared to the much larger scale of building size envisioned by the FBC for today. So, a very tall or a very wide building trying to copy any of these historic styles will not look authentic. It will look odd, out of scale and potentially ostentatious. Any building that goes up will never be a “true” Victorian, a “true” Tudor or a “true” Georgian. Nor will any one particular “stylized” building be visually credible or attractive when, as a result of the FBC, the Town consists of a hodgepodge of large-scale buildings trying to mimic different styles from different historical periods, all in such close proximity to one another on small scale streets. There will be an incongruity of these stylized buildings, no single one of which will be true to form or authentic in its own right. This is what will give a “Disneyland” appearance to the town under the FBC, to borrow from Mr. Williams’ comment.

I agree with Mr. Williams. The six prescribed historical styles should be removed from the rezoning code and the role of the Architectural Review Board should be incorporated. If a builder wants to build a new building, the builder’s architect should be given freedom to design a building without being limited to one of six “historical” stereotypes. Creativity in design should not be suppressed. We should retain the Architectural Review Board in order to

ensure that there is some form of reasonable oversight with respect to how any given proposed building will look.

Allowing consultants to narrowly dictate in advance formulaic architectural stereotypes is such a lackluster, low-brow way to move forward. I disagree with this uninspired approach and I don't see its value from an aesthetic perspective. At the risk of sounding harsh, as one who truly appreciates architecture, I have to be honest here – the DGEIS and associated FBC read as if they were conceived by a bunch of philistines. This rezoning proposal leaves no room for architectural ingenuity. The DGEIS and its proposed form based code have a different driver at play; the goal is to incentivize developers by making it easy and profitable to build. (DGEIS at 1-5; 2-20; Appendix E, Financial Analysis.) Not only does the proposed FBC allow for a scope and scale of building that is too massive for our small hamlet, but the approval process has been excessively “streamlined” and “expedited” – now, instead of independent review by an architectural board, there is a pre-approved, dumbed-down set of formulaic “styles” which will allow building to be approved quickly, by an office person. (DGEIS at 2-20-22.) A set of prescribed styles makes it easy for developers; again, they need not worry about any architectural review and are therefore guaranteed a quick, unobstructed path to building.

This cookie-cutter, pre-approved approach to architecture may be great for developers, but it is a terrible proposition for our town. Is this really what we want? To lose all opportunity for architectural innovation, unique thought and design? Architecture pre-determined by consultants? Again, I ask that the Board please reconsider something other than a “form based” code. For future building, we do not need to – and should not – tie our hands to any one or more particular “form,” one that a consultant decided is acceptable merely because it exists in the Hamlet due to architectural choices, once current, made decades or centuries ago.

The FBC is an unnecessarily restrictive and wholly uninteresting, unsophisticated approach. If the Town *must* change, as the Board believes, then we need to leave room for visionary change, which necessitates the allowance for independence of thought and design. We should not settle for fast-track building where the aesthetics of the entire town take a back seat to quick approvals that benefit only the developer and not the town itself.