



TOWN OF DURHAM
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Town Planner's Review

Wednesday, March 11, 2026

- X. **Architectural Regulations.** Discussion about possible changes to the Durham Architectural Regulations, Article II of the Site Plan Regulations.
- I recommend that the board start a discussion about possible amendments to the Architectural Regulations.

A copy of the Architectural Regulations (“Architectural Design Standards”) is included in the packets. I will also pass out hard copies at the meeting to those who do not receive a hard copy of the packet.

The regulations are part of the Site Plan Regulations. They apply within the six Core Commercial Zoning Districts – CB-1, CB-2, Professional Office, Church Hill, Courthouse, and Coe’s Corner. They are regulations, not guidelines, so compliance is required. They do not apply in the Historic District, where only the Historic District Ordinance applies.

The regulations were adopted in 2012 and there was only one minor amendment made in 2016, so it is worth taking another look at them.

The regulations have been applied for the following projects, among others:

- Madbury Commons
- Pauly’s Pockets
- Renovations to Town and Campus building
- ATO Fraternity on Garrison Avenue
- New apartment building at 30 Madbury Road (and Garrison Avenue)
- Recent renovations to the rear building at Mill Plaza
- Dunkin Donuts

The regulations have been effective. Reviews have generally gone smoothly and I believe that the exterior architectural design of these buildings is significantly better than it would have been without the regulations. No applicant has refused to work with the Town on the design and no person has chosen to not pursue a project because of the standards. Note that it is impossible to have significant architectural regulations (as well as Historic District standards) without involving discretion.

(over)

We require submission of drawings by a licensed architect. I then discuss the drawings with the architect, with as much involvement of the owner as the owner wishes. In most cases, some changes are in order. I point out numerous aspects of the design which I do not think meet the intent of the regulations. The architect makes revisions which they are comfortable with. After one or more iterations I have always found that the architect is fine with the changes and they then meet the regulations. The Planning Board has then completed its own review as part of the site plan review.

While a review of the regulations is in order I think only a handful of changes are needed as shown below as they have functioned well and there are no glaring shortcomings. A significant revision is not necessary.

- Specify Central Business-1 and Central Business-2 rather than just Central Business.
- Numerous simple improvements in language.
- **E) Process.** I strongly recommend adding text providing for the Town to hire an outside architect (unless the Town Planner has the necessary skills) to review plans, coordinate with the applicant's architect, and provide a recommendation to the Planning Board. I have done this work because I have extensive experience in architectural review, but it is unlikely that my successor will have these skills as few planners are trained in architectural review. There are several excellent architects in Durham who I believe would be happy to serve the Town in this manner. The Town would hire them and pay them on an hourly basis.

I believe that the Town should pay the architect, not the applicant. For the same reason that we do not charge fees to HDC applicants, the goal is to hopefully keep the applicant supportive of the process and to elicit their cooperation in design, since some applicants may be resistant to architectural review, rather than to collect funds. The Town can cover this small expense.

- **M) The Roof.** We can include some of the language that was proposed by the Town Council for enhancing character on four story buildings. That language would fit in well with the Architecture Regulations where there is more judgment and flexibility in applying them.
- Beth Olshansky has marked up the existing document with a number of suggested changes, including ideas dealing with scale. This document is included on the website. I will review Beth's suggested changes carefully.