

19 February 2026

Jasmin Farinacci
Town of Ashland, MA
101 Main Street
Ashland, MA 01721

Via email: jfarinacci@ashlandmass.com

Re: Town of Ashland - 55 West Union Street Final Architectural Peer Review

Dear Jasmin,

Dewing Schmid Kearns Architects + Planners, P.C. (studioDSK) has completed an Architectural Peer Review of the documents and comments submitted by the Applicant. This review is an update to the initial review we submitted Jan 20, 2026. In the interim, I met with the Applicant again, and we discussed architectural design. They revised drawings and presented those at the zoning board hearing on February 10th. In summary:

- The building is very long and tall. Architectural changes in materials and the plane of the facade stepping back, as it does at A2 units, assist to break the mass down. The updated 10 Feb drawings reflect a design that helps break down the mass of the building. There are some further detailing revisions we discussed that the Applicant could implement during construction documentation to further enhance that.
- We recommend there be a 3D view shown of the building, from the Dunkin' across the street, to illustrate the height and length of the structure.
- There are several waivers requested, and in general studioDSK recommends accepting them, however we would recommend that the project comply with the energy code as adopted by Ashland.

BASIS OF REVIEW

This review is the result of several meetings with the architect and Applicant, walking the site and adjacent property, and review with colleagues who are planners and architects.

On Dec 16, 2025 and Jan 20, 2026, I met with the Applicant's Architect, Talia Cannistra of Studio Cann and Lynne D. Sweet of LDS Consulting Group, LLC to review the project. On January 15, 2026, I walked the site with the civil engineers, Vito of Connorstone Engineering Inc and Julia Jameson of United Home Experts. I presented my initial review to the ZBA on January 27th. I then met with Ms. Sweet and Ms. Cannistra on February 5th, where Ms. Cannistra revised the drawings. At the February 10th ZBA, the Architect and landscape Architect presented updated drawings. The architectural updates reflected much of the design discussions we had over our three meetings.

For the preparation of this report, the following documents were received and reviewed:

Applicant's Documents Received:

- 10 February Hearing
 - Updated architectural drawings, revised Waiver List, and revised civil and landscape drawings illustrating a fence between 55 West Union St and the abutters' property.

- 27 January Hearing
 - Updated architectural drawings
 - Overlay site plan showing proposed YMCA on Memorial Drive
- 2 May 2025 Application Materials
 - 1. Project Narrative W Union St Ashland 3.31.25.pdf
 - 2. MassHousing Comprehensive Permit Application
 - 3a. 55 W Union – Location Map.pdf
 - 3b. Assessors Map.pdf
 - 3c. FEMA Map.pdf
 - 3d 55 west union Ashland – approved ORAD 10.24.27.pdf
 - 3e. Context Photos.pdf
 - 3f. Aerial photo.pdf
 - 4a. Existing Conditions Plan.pdf
 - 4b. Site Plans.pdf
 - 4c. MBTA Access Easement_Agreement – 55 W Union.pdf
 - 5a. Architectural Plan Set 55 West Union St_PEL Application.pdf
 - 5b. Architectural Narrative.pdf
 - Tabular Zoning.jpg
 - 7a. Deed.pdf
 - 9. Ashland 55 West Union Rent Comp 3.31.25.pdf
 - Town Utility Easement – 55 W Union.pdf
- 2 July 2025 Submitted Application
 - 1. Request for Findings of Facts Union 55 WU.pdf
 - 2. ZBA_Application_Form_55 West Union.pdf
 - 4. PEL – 55 west Ashland.pdf
 - 5c. Town Utility Easement – 55 W Union.pdf
 - 6b. 55 West Union – Site Plans 7-3-20205.pdf
 - 6c. 55 West Union – Fire Truck Template 7-3-2025.pdf
 - 6g Sightline triangles.pdf
- 1 August 2025 Meeting Materials
 - 55 West Union – Site Plan 8—1-2025.pdf –
 - 55 West Union – Stormwater Report.pdf
- Traffic Peer Review documents
- 250729 55 WEST UNION-MDLA-COLOR SITE PLAN.pdf- Overall Landscape Plan
- 55 West Union Stret, ConCom Comments to ZBA Regarding 40B, 8.25.25.pdf
- Town of Ashland ZBA Submission Letter for 55 West Union.pdf

Project Understanding:

From the documents received, we understand the following:

The existing 4.90 acre lot at 55 West Union Street is zoned as Commercial Highway and proposed as a location for building a new 116 unit residential building. Located on a wooded lot on the corner of West Union Street (Route 135) and Memorial Drive, the proposed building details are as follows:

- Composed of (116) residential units and (168) standard parking spaces and 6 accessible spaces for a parking ratio of 1.50.
- Total Gross Square Footage is 134,806 GSF.
- Height is 52'-0" measured from the average grade plane, it is a 4 ½ story structure.
- Unit mix is (72) units of 1 bedroom / 1 bath, (32) 2 bedroom / 2 bathrooms, and (12) 3 bedroom / 2 bathrooms. The unit types are divided equally across the four floors.
- (29) units will be 80% AMI and (87) will be market rate.
- Ground floor has building entry lobby and package area, fitness space, bike storage room, a community room with kitchenette, a work from home area and building support spaces.
- Built with the lowest half story of concrete and steel construction while the upper four floors will be wood construction.
- Site is adjacent to Upper Charles Rail Trail, and a YMCA is planned on the other side of Memorial Drive.

WAIVERS

The project seeks several waivers; the scope of this review addresses those related to principal use; dimensional requirements, height, and number of building stories; and Specialized Energy Code.

Waiver 1 Table of Principal Use Regulations

Multifamily dwelling use is not allowed in the Highway Commerce (CH) zoning district. The proposed project seeks authorization for the construction of one hundred and sixteen (116) dwelling units in one (1) structure. The Applicant requests a waiver from this prohibited use.

studioDSK: We would recommend acceptance of this waiver to comply with 40B percentages for the town. The building will provide much needed housing, with (72) 1 Bedroom units, (32) 2 Bedroom units, and (12) 3 Bedroom units. In addition, the location is a suitable location to live, with the rail trail, the athletic fields down the road, and the future YMCA across the street.

Waiver 2 Table of Dimensional Requirements Section 4.1.1.

The proposed project seeks to construct a building with a maximum height of 52' feet.

studioDSK: The topography of the site climbs up Memorial Drive. The building will feel tall.

- The drawing set includes two (2) renderings with views from West Union and Memorial that are illustrative and useful to understand access and amenities. We would recommend there also be a view drawn from across the street, at the corner where the Dunkin' is, to illustrate the overall building in the site to provide an understanding of the size of the building.
- We would recommend acceptance of this waiver with the caveat that during construction documentation, architectural details further break down the massing of the building.

Waiver 15 Section 7.5.7.6 Multifamily Dwellings; Dimensional Requirements; Building Height and Stories

The waiver states that the proposed project seeks to construct a 4-story building, the architectural narrative says that it is 4 ½ stories.

studioDSK: See comments on Waiver 2.

Waiver 18 Chapter 98- Building Construction

The Applicant has requested a waiver to the degree necessary from Ch 98 Building Construction Article III-Stretch Energy Code.

studioDSK: We would recommend that the project comply with the energy code as adopted by Ashland.

ARCHITECTURAL BUILDING DESIGN PEER REVIEW: OVERALL DESIGN

General comments:

The Town's Design Review Guidelines recommend to "Consider how the building design can be efficiently manipulated to create clusters of units and variations in height, setback, and roof shape." (p. 9, 2015) The following recommendations, reviewed with the architect and Applicant at our meeting 5 February, reflect this aim to break down the massing.

The architectural plans do not have the building lengths drawn, and should be shown. However, they are to scale, and the overall length is about 380'. For comparison, the Cirrus drive buildings up the road are about 240'. Cirrus Apartments, down the road from 55 West Union, are 3-story structures with gable roofs.

The existing site is a wooded corner lot that climbs from elevation 228' to 268'. The building entrance is at 243'-0" at the south end, with a second convenience entrance at the northwest at elevation 258'. The proposed building's parapet is at 302'-6". At 52' feet tall, the building will feel massive. The goal of this review is to provide suggestions for the Applicant to consider as they move forward with design to break down the building's massing.

The neighborhood has single family residences opposite West Union St. The abutter to the southwest is a construction company that has requested a privacy fence. The 10 Feb 2026 landscape and civil drawings reflect that. At the corner opposite the site is a Dunkin'. A YMCA is proposed on Memorial Drive, across the street from the proposed project. Ashland Middle School Fields are to the west.

1. Please confirm the number of accessible units, as they are not indicated on plans.
2. Please provide size, dimensions of materials, and lighting information for signage, if any.

ARCHITECTURAL BUILDING DESIGN PEER REVIEW: DRAWING COMMENTS

Below are the comments as they pertain to each drawing sheet. The comments are also on the marked-up pdfs submitted with this letter.

Comments on 10 Feb 2026 Drawings

A-000: COVER

The rendering was updated for the 10 Feb drawings, with a raised belt course, shadow boxes, and updated topography to see into the building entrance.

A-101 Ground Floor Plan

The 10 Feb drawings were updated to include windows in the Fitness Areas. Though those are largely not visible from West Union St, they are visible in the rendering on A-200 and help activate the façade.

A-102 Typical Building Plan

Responding to design discussions, the 10 Feb drawings indicate fenestration and openings in plan and added fenestration at the north stair.

1. At the north stair, provide additional changes in material and architectural detailing to give articulation to the zone where the building turns. This “Knuckle” is an opportunity to break down the mass of the building. We recommend incorporating a distinct break in material, color, roof line, or building plane to achieve break in the overall singular massing of project. Also see A-201 Exterior Elevations. This can be done during construction documentation.
2. Show overall building dimensions.

A-103 Proposed Level 4 Plan

1. Show overall building dimensions.

A-200 Exterior 3D views

Both renderings this sheet were updated to reflect the 4th floor plan, showing missing windows at mansard roof and providing key plans to orient views as requested. The height of the masonry belt course was revised in order to break down massing. In Perspective 1, which is the view from Memorial Drive, the entrance is now visible and the topography has been fixed so it no longer covers the front entrance. In addition, the door to bike storage is now visible. In Perspective 2, the view from West Union Avenue, the planting configuration now aligns with the landscape plan.

Recommendations:

1. Perspective 2:
 - a. A fence has been added 10 Feb, and would be visible in Perspective 2, which should be updated to reflect that.
 - b. Current set dimension from parking to West Union Street sidewalk is approximately 20'. Rendering to address the dimension.
2. Update drawing title names to indicate what the view is and where it is taken.
3. Add a 3rd Perspective from Dunkin', see mark up.
4. During construction documentation, consider a change in materials at window groupings.

A-201 Exterior Elevations

Updates on the elevation have helped to break down the building's mass. In drawing 4, at the south elevation, the windows at the Fitness area help break up what had been a large blank wall. The windows in Exterior Elevation – North at the north stair are helpful as well. The balconies and dormers help break down the mass, but additional opportunities to break down the building's mass should be studied as the design progresses.

Recommendations: (These could be implemented during construction documentation)

1. Exterior Elevation – North
 - a. “The Knuckle” - recommend incorporating a distinct break in material, color, roof line, or building plane to achieve break in the overall singular massing of the project.
 - b. Review extents of windows at mansard roof level with unit layouts to confirm dormer sizes.

A-202

Photographs of installations of metal roofing, shadow boxes, siding, and brick are shown.

Recommendations:

1. During Construction Documentation, study the placement of windows in the wall plane – a shadow on the window will help reduce building mass.

A-601

1. A3.1 and C1.1 plan types not shown.

Please let us know if you have any questions or comments.

Sincerely,



Amy Sheehan Latva-Kokko, AIA, CPHD, LEED BD+C
Director
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