



# Memorandum

**TO:** City of Hartford Planning Commission  
**FROM:** Hillary Taylor, NCI, Senior Planner  
Ethan Senti, Assistant Planner  
**SUBJECT:** **Proposed Architectural Standards**  
**DATE:** August 29, 2025

This memo provides an overview of proposed architectural standards and an introduction to design review committees and the role they play in maintaining a high architectural standard in downtown areas. The memo is intended to solicit feedback from the Planning Commission on whether the proposed standards are appropriate for the City of Hartford, whether a Design Review Committee is something the City would like to pursue, and how this language might be further adapted to meet the City's needs. Questions are included at the end of the memo to guide feedback.

## ARCHITECTURAL STANDARDS

### Proposed Ordinance Overview

The proposed ordinance introduces architectural standards for development in Hartford's Central Business District and certain B-1 parcels along Main Street. These standards are intended to enhance and preserve the historic charm of downtown and ensure new development fits with the surrounding context.

The regulations address core aspects of building design, including materials, façade treatments, windows, entrances, and overall building form. Buildings are expected to use durable, traditional materials such as brick, stone, or wood; incorporate transparent storefront windows along Main Street; and maintain a clear relationship to the street with defined entrances and pedestrian-friendly ground floors. Blank walls, inappropriate façade materials, and overly modern lighting types are restricted to maintain consistency with the downtown setting.

Additional provisions guide rehabilitation of historic buildings to protect original storefronts, windows, and decorative features, while also allowing public art such as murals to add vibrancy. Outdoor seating and patios are permitted, provided pedestrian access along sidewalks is maintained. Together, these standards give the Downtown Design Review Committee a framework for evaluating projects and ensuring that private investment enhances Hartford's long-term vision for a cohesive and welcoming downtown.

While architectural standards for residential development have been adopted by municipalities, they are oftentimes more difficult to enforce and may discourage new development. For this reason, we recommend limiting the standards to commercial buildings in the downtown core, as outlined in the proposed ordinance.



## **Proposed Ordinance Language**

### **Section 2.5 ARCHITECTURAL STANDARDS**

- A. Architectural Standards Explained. The City of Hartford hereby requires a minimum standard of architectural style and aesthetic character for certain parcels within the City. The primary purpose for this is to preserve and strengthen the City's unique character and charm within its Central Business District (CBD) and immediate periphery areas.
- B. Where Required. With the exception of single family, two-family, three-family, and four-family residential buildings, architectural standards described in Section 11.8 shall apply to all parcels and new buildings and significant remodels in the CBD and select parcels in the B-1 District with frontage on East Main Street and West Main Street, between Mary Street to Wilson Street. The design of a new building and significant remodels is subject to review and approval by the Downtown Design Review Committee.
- C. Where Architectural Standards are Found. Architectural standards are described in Section 11.8.
- D. What Architectural Standards Entail. The required architectural standards in Section 11.8 describe the required built conditions for CBD and certain B-1 parcels pertaining to the following site features:
1. Building Form. This includes requirements for the base, middle, and top of buildings as well as building alignment and storefront design.
  2. Windows. This describes requirements for all windows including transparency requirements, number of windows required, and style of windows.
  3. Lighting. This requires fully shielded lighting and describes permitted light source types.
  4. Signs. All signs shall comply with requirements set forth in Article 18.
  5. Ground floor design. This describes requirements for building entrance design, architectural features, and building orientation requirements.
  6. Architectural features. This describes the process for rehabilitation of historic buildings.
  7. Outdoor seating, dining, and patios. All CBD and applicable B-1 parcels are permitted to have outdoor seating and dining spaces, accessory to a principal use. Outdoor seating and dining areas must be fully enclosed by a permitted fence type and shall not fully encroach onto sidewalk space.

### **Section 11.8 ARCHITECTURAL STANDARDS**

- A. Applicability. New development and significant remodels (40% or more of the property) within the CBD shall meet the following general standards:
1. General Building Standards. Buildings shall be designed to relate well to other structures in the CBD area.
    - a) Materials. Building façade materials shall include wood, brick or stone, stucco, and approved ornamental metal. Synthetic materials such as vinyl or aluminum siding shall be prohibited.
    - b) Aesthetics. All structures shall reflect and complement the traditional materials, aesthetic character, and construction techniques generally found in the vicinity and greater Van Buren County region. Buildings shall be appropriate in scale and relation to existing structures.



- c) Windows. Display windows comprising fifty percent (50%) or more of the store façade are required for first floor retail and restaurant uses, facing Main Street. Buildings shall be oriented to block parking lots from view from the street where possible.
  - d) Building Colors. For building renovations and additions, exterior finish materials and colors used shall be consistent, or compatible, with the character of the surrounding district to create a uniform and recognizable identity. Wherever possible, harmonization of colors is preferred. This standard shall not be interpreted as prohibiting the incorporation of public art, such as a mural, to buildings or sites.
  - e) Fire Protection. New buildings shall incorporate sprinkler systems for fire protection purposes, unless the City of Hartford Fire Department approves a different method of fire protection.
2. Expansions of Developed Sites. Buildings and sites existing prior to the Effective Date of adoption of these standards may be expanded or improved as follows:
- a) Less than 25% of existing condition. Any development activity on a developed site that would increase the floor area of the existing building or the area of existing site improvements by less than twenty-five percent (25%) need not comply with the requirements of this Article. However, any improvements should result in the site being more compliant and shall not result in the site being less compliant, with the requirements of this Article.
  - b) Greater than 25% of existing condition. Whenever a building or site improvement expansion of greater than twenty-five percent (25%) of the existing condition is proposed, the activity shall comply with requirements as described herein.
3. Redevelopment of Existing Sites. Redevelopment of existing buildings and sites existing prior to the Effective Date of adoption of these standards may be expanded or improved as follows:
- a) Less than 50% of existing condition. Whenever 50 percent (50%) or less of the existing building will be demolished, replaced, or renovated, the development activity need not comply with the requirements of this Section. However, any changes that may occur as a result of the development activity should result in the site being more compliant and shall not result in the site being less compliant with the requirements of this Article.
  - b) Greater than 50% of existing condition. Whenever more than 50 percent (50%) of an existing building will be demolished or replaced, the development activity shall comply with all of the requirements as described herein.
  - c) Waiver of Requirements. The DDRC may grant waivers from certain requirements of this Section. Waivers under this Article are separate from dimensional variances, and intended to permit reasonable use of property where the strict application of the requirements of this Section would not further the public purpose and an altered design standard will still meet the intent and purpose of this Article.
    - 1) Waivers Permitted.
      - (a) Architectural Standards. The DDRC may waive up to three (3) architectural standards per project provided in this Chapter.
      - (b) Materials. The DDRC may modify the material standards.
    - 2) Waivers Not Permitted.



(a) Minimum or maximum building height. The DDRC shall not grant waivers to approve a different standard for minimum and maximum building heights as required in this Article.

d) Application and Review Procedures. The applicant shall clearly identify all requested waivers on the application and site plan. The DDRC shall evaluate the requested waivers and approve, approve with conditions, or deny the waiver request. In evaluating a waiver request, the DDRC shall take into account the following considerations:

- 1) Approval of the waiver will not result in development that is incompatible with or will negatively impact existing or potential future development in the vicinity of the property to be developed.
- 2) The requested waiver is consistent with the intent and purpose of this Article.
- 3) The waiver will result in a superior development when compared with what could be achieved through the strict application of the requirements of this Article.
- 4) A lesser waiver will not accomplish the same purpose as the requested waiver.

B. Conflicts. The architectural standards in this Article are meant to complement and supplement applicable standards found elsewhere in this Zoning Ordinance. Where conflicts exist between this Article and other sections of the City of Hartford Zoning Ordinance, the standards in this Article shall govern.

C. Building Form. All new buildings within the CBD shall conform to the following requirements:

- 1) Base, Middle, Top. All buildings shall incorporate a base, middle, and top, as applicable.
  - (a) Base. The base shall include an entryway with transparent windows and a horizontal expression line, such as a molding or reveal, defining the transition between the ground floor and upper stories. The molding or reveal shall have a depth of at least two (2) inches and a height of at least four (4) inches. If a one-story building is proposed, the horizontal expression line is not required.
  - (b) Middle. The middle may include windows, bays, or balconies that are located between the reveal and the top area.
  - (c) Top. The top includes the wall area from the bottom of the roof structure to the top of the parapet wall of the building. The building roof shall be defined by a cornice, roof overhang, or other terminating feature.
- 2) Unified Storefront Design. If a building has several storefronts, they should be unified in design treatment, such as the design of windows and door openings, materials, and colors, to the greatest extent possible.
- 3) Blank Walls. There are to be no blank façades. All public façades must provide windows and façade offsets or breaks (such as vertical pilasters, columns, or other architectural elements) to break up the scale of the building. Distance between breaks shall be consistent with the scale and rhythm of adjacent buildings.
- 4) Alignment. Windowsills, moldings, and cornices shall substantially align with those on adjacent buildings.
  - (a) The bottom and top line defining the edge of the windows (the "windowsill alignment") shall not vary more than two feet from the alignment of surrounding buildings.



(b) If the adjoining buildings have windowsill alignments that vary by more than two feet from one another, the proposed building shall align with one of the adjoining buildings.

(c) This requirement may be waived.

D. Windows.

1. For front and side façades facing a public street, parking area, or pedestrian cut-through or side alley:
  - a) Windows and doors shall comprise at least 50 percent (50%) of the first-floor façade for front façades and 35 percent (35%) of the first floor for side façades.
  - b) Windows shall comprise at least 35 percent (35%) of the total façade area above the first floor.
  - c) Windows above the first floor shall be vertical in proportion, with a height to width ratio of at least two (2) to one (1).
2. For rear façades facing a public street or parking area, windows shall comprise at least 20 percent (20%) of the total façade area. All other rear façades are encouraged, but not required, to meet this standard.
3. Double-hung or fixed windows are preferred for all retail applications. Accordion or folding doors and sliding windows may be permitted for ground floor uses to provide indoor-outdoor service, providing adequate sidewalk clearance is provided.
4. Ground floor windows (including display windows) shall be comprised of at least 70% transparent glass unless the window is intended for a ground floor residential dwelling unit.

E. Lighting.

1. All light fixtures shall be fully shielded and directed downward.
2. The use of electronic displays, LED rope lighting, backlit awnings, and halogen lights shall be prohibited. The DDRC shall make a determination if a lighting type not listed in this Section is appropriate in the CBD.
3. Building storefronts are permitted soft uplighting to highlight unique architectural features. Building storefronts may also utilize holiday display lighting as deemed appropriate by the DDRC.

F. Signs. All signs shall comply with standards set forth in Article 18.

G. Ground Floor Design.

1. Building entrances. Building entrances shall be clearly defined by recessing the entrance, or utilizing elements such as pediments, columns, awnings, overhangs, or solar shades. Any such element shall be architecturally compatible with the style, materials, and colors of the building.
2. Building orientation. All buildings shall have their principal entrance or entrances open onto a street, sidewalk, or public space. The principal building entrance shall not open onto a parking lot, although a secondary entrance may be provided to a parking lot. Corner buildings shall have at least one entrance addressing each street frontage.



3. At-grade entryways. Primary building entrances shall align with the elevation of the adjacent sidewalk. It is not the intent of this section to preclude the use of below or above-grade entryways, provided that such entryways are secondary, not principal, building entrances.

H. Architectural Features. For rehabilitation of structures within the CBD that are of historic significance or character, the following standards shall also apply.

1. Existing and original storefronts should be retained wherever possible.
2. Deteriorated architectural features or historic materials shall be repaired rather than replaced wherever possible.
3. Display windows, transom windows, and doors shall not be covered with solid materials such as brick, cladding, paneling, siding, or window air conditioning units.
4. Decorative architectural features including but not limited to bulkheads, cornices, and window hoods shall not be removed, altered, or covered.
5. Improper solid coverings of decorative architectural features, windows, or doors should be removed and restored to their original state to the greatest extent possible, using natural building materials identified in Section 11.8.A.1.

I. Outdoor Seating, Dining, and Patios.

1. All parcels within the CBD and applicable B-1 parcels may have outdoor seating and patio areas as permitted accessory uses to approved principal uses.
2. All outdoor seating, dining, and patio areas shall maintain a minimum of five (5) feet of clear path for pedestrians.
3. Outdoor seating, dining, and patio spaces shall be enclosed with a decorative railing, fence, planters, or similar barrier material. Outdoor seating enclosures may include an opening for pedestrian ingress or egress.
4. Outdoor shading devices, such as umbrellas and retractable awnings, shall not project onto the pedestrian sidewalk. Outdoor shading devices shall maintain a minimum of five (5) feet of clear path for pedestrian movement.

## **DOWNTOWN DESIGN REVIEW COMMITTEE**

### **Proposed Ordinance Overview**

Some cities use a Design Review Committee to make sure that new buildings and renovations fit the community's vision for downtown. While zoning rules cover basics like building height, setbacks, and parking, a design review committee looks more closely at design details—the appearance of a building, how it relates to the street, and how it contributes to the overall character of downtown. This extra level of review helps ensure that projects are not only functional but also attractive, high-quality, and welcoming.

The committee does not give final approvals. Instead, it makes recommendations that are forwarded to the Planning Commission, which has the ultimate decision-making authority. By adding this step, the City promotes consistency in development, strengthens community character, and reinforces downtown's role as a vibrant place to live, work, and visit.

If Hartford were to establish a downtown design review committee, here is how it would work: The Downtown Design Review Committee (DDRC) would be appointed by the City Council to review all development and



redevelopment proposals within the Central Business District (**CBD**). Supported by City staff or their designee, the DDRC would evaluate site plans to ensure that projects meet the architectural, dimensional, and character goals outlined in the zoning ordinance. The DDRC would also have the authority to recommend design conditions that go beyond the ordinance's minimum standards when necessary to achieve the intended downtown character.

### **Proposed Ordinance Language**

#### **Section 11.7 DOWNTOWN DESIGN REVIEW COMMITTEE**

- A. The City Council shall appoint a Downtown Design Review Committee (DDRC) for all development and redevelopment projects and proposals in the CBD. The DDRC shall be supported and/or staffed by the City Administrator, Zoning Administrator, Planner, or their designee.
1. Members shall serve two-year terms. There is no limit to the number of consecutive terms a committee member may serve.
  2. The DDRC may contract and/or assign some of the DDRC's administrative duties, but not decision authority, to qualified design professionals as needed. It will be the duty of the DDRC to consider and act upon such proposals or plans submitted to it in accordance with the design requirements established by this Article.
  3. The architectural and dimensional standards as required herein shall be considered minimum requirements. Upon determination that additional development conditions are necessary to achieve the intended character within the CBD, the DDRC shall have the authority to require additional building and site design standards above the minimums required by this Article.
  4. The DDRC will meet monthly or as needed to properly perform its duties. After a quorum is reached, the DDRC actions on matters will be subject to a majority vote of members present. The DDRC will keep and maintain a record of all actions taken, and shall be subject to Act 267 of 1976, The Open Meetings Act, as amended.
  5. All development within the CBD shall be subject to review by the Downtown Design Review Committee as part of the site plan approval process. Applicants shall submit an application and an additional five (5) copies of all site plans to the City Clerk at least fourteen (14) days prior to the Downtown Design Review Committee meeting.
  6. The DDRC shall review applications in accordance with this section and shall present recommendations to the Planning Commission pertaining to site plan approval and potential conditions of approval. Final approval authority shall reside with the Planning Commission in accordance with Article 19.



## FEEDBACK REQUESTED

These standards are flexible and can be shaped to reflect Hartford's priorities. To help tailor it appropriately, we ask that the Planning Commission provide feedback on the following questions:

- Do the proposed standards strike the right balance between preserving downtown character and allowing flexibility for property owners? Does the Planning Commission anticipate these standards being a significant barrier to development downtown?
- Are there any design elements missing (e.g., signage, landscaping, materials) that should be considered?
- Is the establishment of a Downtown Design Review Committee an approach the Planning Commission supports, and if so, how should its role or membership be structured to best serve Hartford?
- Are there any concerns about the administration or enforceability of these standards that should be addressed before moving forward?

Please review the draft language and feedback questions and be prepared to share your guidance on how the ordinance should be further adapted at the next Planning Commission meeting.

Regards,

Hillary Taylor, Senior Planner