



# Town of Ashland

MASSACHUSETTS

## Planning Board – Design Review Committee Retreat Minutes

Ashland Town Hall, Meeting Room B and C

January 5, 2023, at 6:00 PM

Approved May 25, 2023

Present:     **Planning Board**  
Tricia Kendall, Chair  
Anna Tesmenitsky, Vice-Chair  
Catherine Jurczyk, Clerk  
Marcelo Arjona  
Deepa Venkat

**Design Review Committee**  
Cathy Rooney, Chair  
Bill Novakowski, Vice-Chair  
Brendon Carey  
Kevin Mowatt  
Ujwala Pawnarker  
Hannah Stein

Absent:       Kevin McClean, Planning Board



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1 **Call to Order**

2 Ms. Kendall called the Planning Board meeting to order and Ms. Rooney called the Design Review  
3 Committee meeting to order at 6:30 pm.

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5 **Introductions**

6 Members of both groups introduced themselves and noted why they joined their respective groups.  
7 Ms. Rooney asked if members felt it was their job to educate the public.

8  
9 Kendall: Part of any public/professional position has an educational component, but it is not the  
10 primary goal.

11  
12 Tesmenitsky: Elected officials are public servants. Education can be mutual, with both sides learning  
13 from the other which is difficult because of the diverse views.

14  
15 Rooney: Questions arise from the public that the members can answer (educate).

16  
17 Venkat: The boards are set up to be accessible to the community: meetings are public and online.  
18 Education is a two-way process, and the public wants to learn and use the resources available.  
19 Education is a component that is built in already and doesn't need emphasis.

20  
21 Arjona: Agrees with Deepa. Anyone who wants to be educated can be. The focus should be on the  
22 actual responsibilities of the board/committee; attention should be on that process.

23  
24 Novakowski: There are already some ready-made vehicles for education such as online newsletters  
25 where information can be readily offered.

26  
27 **History and Past Relationship**

28 Ms. Kendall gave background information on the relationship of the Planning Board and the DRC  
29 since mid-2019 when she joined the board. The PB is design heavy now, but it wasn't always. At  
30 that time, the chair and vice-chair of the DRC came before the PB and seemed frustrated that their  
31 viewpoint wasn't taken into consideration or was being ignored. Ms. Kendall and Peter Matchak  
32 (Town Planner) began setting up meetings to understand and strengthen the relationship to the DRC,  
33 then Covid began. During Covid, the PB was busy with the Mindess school project, and the DRC lost

34 members, leaving no quorum. Ms. Kendall then sought out new members to bring expertise to the  
35 DRC and who could help the PB do its job. She noted that she would like to find a civil engineer to  
36 join the DRC.

37

### 38 **Roles and Responsibilities**

39 Question: What should be the relationship between the PB and the DRC?

40

#### 41 ***Planning Board***

42

43 Jurczyk: Need to look at bylaws to determine the relationship of the committees, and the specific  
44 timing of the process may need to be changed. Suggested that the DRC could come in early for an  
45 overview of the project. The heavy lift of reviewing criteria is the role of the PB.

46

47 Arjona: Sees the DRC in a supporting role for the PB. Two main functions of the DRC: 1. Direct: A  
48 reviewer and adviser for proposed projects; can take a deep dive on issues of concern to the PB. 2.  
49 Indirect: A research body to explore specific areas of projects or that other towns have found  
50 important and bring that research back to the PB.

51

52 Venkat: Design details such as dormers should be in the realm of the DRC, leaving the PB to focus on  
53 the big picture. Suggested further strengthening the DRC with more architectural experience. The  
54 DRC should focus on the look and feel of the building, including context, details, and colors/materials.  
55 PB is design heavy now but may not be in the future; whatever is set up now has to work in the  
56 future. Need to give DRC time to develop their strength.

57

58 Kendall: PB appoints the DRC as a “cabinet of advisors.” PB makes the final decisions, but it can rely  
59 on the DRC for good insight and advice to provide confidence for those decisions. High-level  
60 decisions stay with the PB: size, unit count, neighborhood fit, affordable housing. PB can’t make  
61 decisions solely based on design but must take other factors into consideration.

62

63 Tesmenitsky: PB currently focuses too heavily on design and not enough on policy, strategy, and  
64 planning. DRC works on design so the PB can plan. DRC helps PB fill the design vision for the  
65 community. DRC can also weigh in on other “planning based” items like zoning.

66

#### 67 ***Design Review Committee***

68

69 Stein: Notes that the DRC should be looking at design, and working together with the PB, not against  
70 each other. Is a graphic designer and thought that signage would be a part of the DRC tasks, but so  
71 far it has not. Later noted that a process is needed on how to work with developers and how to work  
72 among ourselves (the two boards).

73

74 Carey: Very comfortable reviewing a plan and seeing its strengths and weaknesses. He is interested  
75 in how a project fits into the community but has no specific agenda across projects. Supports  
76 reasonable improvements and suggestions and likes the idea of design ideas influencing zoning.

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Novakowski: Recommends bringing in DRC at the initiation of projects. Emphasizes applicants providing an accurate version of the building and the landscape. Feels the role of the DRC is to ensure that projects are integrated into the town. By the bylaws, the DRC is responsible for the aesthetic development of Ashland.

Pawnarker: A critical problem is that applicants submit very inaccurate renderings. Part of the role of the DRC is to “cleanup” these inaccuracies before the project goes to the PB. Supports the DRC having an initial early look at a project. DRC doesn’t always know what has happened at PB meetings, and it needs to have a guideline when projects come in.

Rooney: Recommends the PB and DRC review a project together at an early meeting. Developers expect the DRC to stick to the list from the PB, which may not cover all issues. The DRC needs to uphold the fabric of the town, which also includes scale and massing. Having joint meetings at the beginning would show that the boards are united, but better methods of communication between the boards are needed.

Mowatt: Including the DRC early would be a better process. Agrees that PB should be looking at the big picture, and the DRC looking at the architectural details. Noted that it is unfair to applicants to go through significant design iterations late in the process. It is the DRC’s responsibility to uphold the design review guidelines, to fit a building into the fabric of the town, and to provide feedback to the PB.

*Further Notes From the PB:*

Arjona: Noted that signage (as discussed by Hannah) as a perfect example of a research pathway for the DRC. Explains that it is impossible to renderings to be completely accurate early in the project (which is what applications are); it is not a realistic design process. Provide a clear process: once the PB understands the challenges of the project, it creates a bullet list of issues for the DRC to address. This should be the bulk of the work, though the DRC can comment on other issues as well.

Tesmenitsky: Noted that the bylaws do not prevent an applicant from going to the DRC before the PB sends it to the DRC. There needs to be more material in writing between the boards, rather than relying on the applicant to relay information.

General: Use a similar process to engineering third party review to document and keep track of design issues and their resolutions.

**Creation/Modification of Documents and Processes**

Sustainability Checklist: Each board/committee will have 2 representatives forming a working group.

DRC Checklist: Currently an internal list regarding questions/issues to consider for every project.

120 Bylaws: Key bylaws may be related to the comprehensive plan process, but a working group for  
121 priority bylaws related to PB and DRC could be useful.

122

123 **Other Ideas:**

124 **Themes:** Ms. Pawnarker suggested that the groups consider “themes” that should be required  
125 design elements in certain zones, such as bike racks along Pond Street.

126

127 **Scale:** Ms. Venkat noted the groups should be mindful of the scale of a project related to what can  
128 be requested of the applicant.

129

130 **Design Review Committee Appointments**

131 A discussion of the process for appointing DRC members. Ms. Rooney provided info on past DRC  
132 appointment processes. Ms. Kendall noted the legal responsibility of PB to appoint members, the  
133 difference between regular and alternate members, and the typical process that she has followed in  
134 filling seats. There was disagreement over the proper process, and general agreement that it would  
135 be good to put a process on paper. Ms. Kendall noted that the current situation of having candidates  
136 in alternate seats when full seats are open is unusual. There are 4 seats for 3 applicants, and the PB  
137 will be addressing these appointments as soon as possible.

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139 **Action Items**

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141 Create the following documents for review and discussion:

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- 143 1. Appointment process for DRC candidates.
- 144 2. Process/timeline for development projects, including types and accuracy expectations of  
145 drawings.
- 146 3. Communication/review document (similar to the GCG third-party review document) for  
147 keeping track of Planning Board, Design Review Committee, and Applicant design comments.

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149 **Adjournment**

150 Ms. Kendall motioned to adjourn the Planning Board meeting at 9:30 pm. Venkat-aye, Tesmenitsky-  
151 aye, Jurczyk-aye, and Kendall-aye, with a vote of 4-0-0. (Arjona left earlier.)