OHIO HOUSING COUNCIL

September 3, 2026

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Dear Ms. Cahill,

On behalf of the Ohio Housing Council, thank you for producing a second draft of the *Design and Architectural Standards (DAS)* and the accompanying *Process Manual (DAPM)*. It is evident that you put significant time and effort into these versions, and that you gave serious consideration to our comments on the first drafts. We are grateful for both.

The relationships you have built and the process you have used to this point—seven stakeholder meetings, a commitment to rebuild the standards from the ground up rather than patch what existed, an extended comment period followed by several long and detailed discussions, and second drafts that incorporated much of the collective feedback—have already borne fruit.

Comments on the DAS

The second draft is a substantial improvement on what was already a good-faith start. It has fewer provisions, it is better organized, and it reflects a willingness to reconsider the rationale and need for individual provisions rather than simply defend them.

Positive Changes

While we are appreciative of many of the changes in this draft, a few of them are worthy of specific mention as examples of improvement.

- **Common area cap.** Between the first draft and the second, it was discovered that OHFA had included this provision in past versions in the belief that it was required elsewhere. Rather than assuming this was (still) the case, you looked into it, realized it was not a requirement now, and changed course. The Agency also recognized what we argued about incentives: developers already face economic pressure to minimize common space, so the cap guarded against a risk that does not exist while forcing poor design choices to satisfy an arbitrary limit. You deserve a lot of credit for your willingness to re-examine long-held assumptions and to listen to compelling arguments.

- **Minimum bedroom sizes.** As we discussed in our first letter, those minimums worked against the unit size minimums, forcing square footage into rooms where residents did not want it and away from the living and kitchen space where they did. Deleting these minimums allows the developers and the design team to make the best decisions for each development.
- **Energy provisions.** Cleaning these up by striking the window manufacturer letter, the HERS rater certification, and the storefront provision removed duplication and reduced expense without lowering any standard. This is precisely the exercise we asked OHFA to run across the document.
- **Moisture-resistant gypsum board requirement.** Narrowing this from an open-ended radius to an enumerated list ensures the requirement fits the problem it is trying to address.
- **Rocker switch requirement.** Removing this requirement from rehab entirely and applying it only to senior developments in new construction is the kind of differentiation by project type and population we have urged in place of one-size-fits-all requirements.
- **Guidance on rehabilitation exception requests.** The new R4.3.2 identifies seven considerations OHFA will weigh when a rehab project's existing units fall below the minimum sizes: preserved affordability, historic character, functional layout, offsetting common area, remote storage, the degree of noncompliance, and market support for smaller units. OHFA stopped short of committing to a result, and we understand why. But telling applicants what will make an argument persuasive is genuinely useful, and it is the kind of transparency that makes the exception process work as intended rather than feeling arbitrary.

Suggestions for further improvement to the DAS

We also want to acknowledge that there were several places where OHFA kept a provision we questioned but added a rationale explaining the “why”. We do not necessarily find every one of those explanations equally persuasive, but the practice itself matters: a standard accompanied by its reasoning is easier to comply with, easier to enforce consistently, and easier to revisit when conditions change. We ask that OHFA keep going before finalizing this document. Many provisions still lack a stated reason, and several of the rationales that were added explain more of the “what” a provision does rather than the “why” it is needed.

We echoed your belief when we wrote in June that a good developer should never feel the DAS. This draft comes considerably closer to that standard. We offer our remaining comments in that spirit. Most are narrow. Several ask only for clarification of language that we suspect does not mean what it appears to say. Where we continue to disagree, we have tried to say plainly what we would change and why.

ENERGY STAR Version 7 Windows (N2.8.2.4 and R4.8.3.5)

Draft 2 moves the window requirement from ENERGY STAR Version 6 to Version 7 in both sections. We understand OHFA's position to be based on the belief that the cost premium between V6 and V7 has substantially closed since V7 was introduced and that the requirement therefore imposes little or no additional cost.

Given the short comment period on this new provision, we have not had time to fully validate the preliminary feedback we have received that there is still a per-window premium, driven in part by V7's thermal performance requirements that push vinyl assemblies toward triple glazing in climate zone 5. However, we have consistently argued that the burden should not be on us to disprove OHFA's understanding. Where OHFA premises a requirement on current market pricing, OHFA should supply the evidence of that pricing, and Draft 2 does not identify any.

We ask OHFA to do one of three things before the standards are finalized:

1. Publish the pricing analysis supporting the conclusion that the premium has closed, and we will accept it if it holds up,
2. retain V6 until that analysis exists, or
3. permit V6 compliance where the project meets a green building or energy certification standard that independently governs envelope performance.

The third option would let projects pursuing certification satisfy the underlying objective without the incremental window cost.

This requirement is troubling on multiple levels: the likely increased costs without a corresponding increased benefit; the belief that the price differential no longer exists is not supported by anything in the draft; and if a requirement can be tightened on the strength of an assumption about market conditions, then the standards will drift upward every cycle in response to impressions rather than analysis. That is the pattern the ground-up rewrite was meant to break, and it would not take many cycles for us end up right back where we started with this effort a year ago.

No-Step Entry (N2.2.2)

N2.2.2 requires that the building and all dwelling units have a no-step entry of one-half inch or less at the main entrance. Read narrowly, this addresses the building's main entrance.

Read more broadly, the phrase "all dwelling units" extends the requirement to every unit door in the development.

We are concerned that the second reading would effectively eliminate garden-style walk-up buildings with open breezeways. In that product type, the deck construction at upper-level breezeways cannot accommodate an accessible threshold at the unit door. There is no way to build it. Garden walk-ups remain one of the most cost-effective family products available in Ohio markets, and we hope that OHFA does not intend to foreclose them.

We ask OHFA to clarify that N2.2.2 applies to the building's main entrance and to unit entries already governed by the Fair Housing Act and Section 504. Those authorities address covered multifamily dwellings comprehensively, and where they require a no-step entry, one will be provided. Where they do not, the requirement should not be extended by implication.

Elevators (N2.2.3.1)

N2.2.3.1 requires an elevator in all developments exceeding three stories. This restates an existing building code requirement. Our first comment letter asked OHFA to remove code restatements throughout, and OHFA removed several. This one remained, without explanation.

So, we're simply renewing the request because restating code adds length without adding protection, and it creates the risk that the DAS and the code drift apart as the code is amended. We note that N2.2.3.2, which addresses single-story limitations for particular populations, does real work the code does not do, and we are not asking OHFA to remove or change it.

Kitchen Venting (N2.5.4)

N2.5.4 requires all kitchen venting to exhaust to the exterior. Our understanding is that the currently adopted energy code already requires ducted range exhaust, which would make this provision redundant for the same reasons as the elevator requirement above.

If that understanding is correct, we ask that N2.5.4 be removed. If OHFA is requiring something beyond what the code requires, we ask for a statement of what the additional requirement is and why it is needed.

We note and appreciate that the parallel rehabilitation provision, R4.5.4, permits recirculating hoods where a PCNA documents that the existing duct is undersized or absent. That is exactly the kind of condition-based flexibility we have asked for, and it works.

Landing Zones (N2.5.5 and R4.5.5)

Draft 1 reduced the landing zone from the current fifteen inches to twelve for new construction and nine for rehabilitation. We support both the reduction and the differentiation.

However, we continue to be concerned with the prescriptive structure of this provision. It requires a landing zone on each side of the stove and sink and at least one side of the refrigerator. On constrained floor plans, and particularly in rehabilitation, a layout may deliver ample usable counter surface while failing this specific configuration.

We ask OHFA to add an alternative path to compliance based on total usable countertop, as was proposed during the Columbus stakeholder session: a project may satisfy N2.5.5 by providing a specified aggregate linear footage of countertop adjacent to appliances and the sink, without regard to its distribution. If the goal is fewer exception requests over minor items, this is low-hanging fruit. Every exception request generated by a workable kitchen that happens not to match this configuration consumes OHFA staff time that would be better spent on genuinely hard calls.

Outlet, Phone Jack, and Data Port Height (N2.9.3.3)

N2.9.3.3 requires that outlets, phone jacks, and data ports be installed at least eighteen inches above finished floor to the center of the box; this second draft has changed "should" to "must," which appears to be the result of a uniform replacement throughout the document.

We remain uncertain why this requirement exists. ANSI A117.1 and the ADA already establish reach range requirements, and fifteen inches is the accepted standard. The additional three inches creates real conflicts in practice, particularly with window sill heights, and no rationale accompanies the change.

We ask OHFA either to align N2.9.3.3 with the applicable reach range standards or to explain what the eighteen-inch dimension accomplishes that fifteen inches does not and why that is worth the challenges it creates.

Scope of the Standards in Mixed-Income Developments

Draft 2 removes the word "affordable" as a modifier of "units" in a number of provisions. N2.3.4 now reads "all units" where it previously read "all affordable units," and similar edits appear throughout both the N and R sections.

We assume this is a drafting cleanup based on the premise that the DAS applies only to affordable units in any event. This is consistent with our members' experience: in mixed-income developments, OHFA's architectural review has historically addressed only the affordable component. But the edits are not uniform. For example, N2.3.4 now reads "all units" while N2.3.1, directly above it, retains "all affordable units." The new construction kitchen provision at N2.5.1 dropped the modifier; its rehabilitation counterpart at R4.5.1 kept it. Read as drafted, adjacent provisions now appear to have different scopes, and while it is conceivable that OHFA intends for some provisions to apply to only affordable units while others apply to all units in the development, we hope this is not the case and would be surprised if it were so.

If our assumption is correct, the cleanest solution would be to include a statement of applicability in the General section and then remove all instances in the provisions where “affordable” is modifying “units”.

Leasing and Occupancy Obligations for Accessible Units

Our first comment letter asked OHFA to address the leasing and occupancy obligations that attach to Section 504 mobility units. Draft 2 does not take this up, perhaps because OHFA determined this document is not the right place to handle it.

Whatever the right venue turns out to be, we want to make sure it does not go unanswered. Draft 2 retains a mobility unit requirement above the federal five percent minimum, and while OHFA has now supplied a rationale for that decision, the rationale addresses need in the aggregate. It does not address distribution. Demand for accessible units is not uniform across Ohio's submarkets, and in some markets our members expect difficulty filling the required units with households that need them.

We ask OHFA to provide guidance on marketing and occupancy obligations where a project has made good-faith efforts and accessible units remain vacant, including how long a unit must be held and what documentation satisfies the Agency. This is guidance our members need regardless of where the percentage lands.

Comments on the Process Manual

The six-week review commitment, the required meeting in place of a battle of letters, and the new Exception Inquiry process all move toward something our members have wanted for years: a review process with mutual accountability and predictable timelines. We have two suggestions below on the details, but the direction is undeniably right.

Suggestions for further improvement to the Process Manual

Appeals (Architectural Review Appeals)

Draft 2 removes the requirement that an appeal "cite the governing regulation" in conflict with the Staff Architect's decision. That is a welcome change; it had placed the burden on the applicant to locate authority the reviewer was relying on.

We'd ask OHFA to go one step further: when a determination of noncompliance is issued in the first place, require the reviewer to cite the specific DAS provision, code section, or federal requirement being applied. This costs OHFA nothing when the review is well-founded, prevents unproductive correspondence when it isn't, and makes any appeal that follows simpler to decide.

Blower Door Test Failures and the Exception Inquiry Process

Neither draft addresses what happens when a unit fails the blower door threshold. We understand from recent conversations with OHFA that Exception Inquiries will be reviewed individually, taking project-wide average performance into account. We ask that this be documented in the DAPM, since a requirement that can only be verified after construction is complete leaves no room to price uncertainty at underwriting.

Exception Inquiry

We enthusiastically support the addition of an Exception Inquiry process. The ability to get a determination before a project has a name, an architect, or an application addresses a real problem, and the ten business day commitment is meaningful.

Our one concern is with the documentation standard. The DAPM states that the Exception Inquiry process is identical to an Exception Request, requiring reasonable justification and supporting documentation. At the stage the inquiry is designed to serve, that documentation frequently does not exist. A developer evaluating whether to pursue an acquisition has no design team engaged and no drawings to submit.

If the inquiry requires the same package as a formal request, we would not be surprised if developers skip it with the provision going unused. We ask OHFA to state that an Exception Inquiry may be supported by the information reasonably available at the time of submission, and that OHFA will issue a determination on that basis, with the understanding that a materially different project may require a new request.

Conclusion

It is worth reiterating our recognition that this draft reflects a great deal of work, much of it in response to comments from us and others. We are appreciative not only for the meaningful changes that have been made from the current DAS and the first draft of this iteration, but also the signal that it sends about OHFA's desire to be a good partner with the development community and other stakeholders, a desire we strongly share.

We would welcome the chance to discuss any of these items before the 2027 standards are finalized, and we are glad to bring the developers and architects on our taskforce into that conversation if it would be useful. Thank you again for the seriousness with which you have approached this rewrite. We have come a long way together. With a few more relatively small but meaningful changes, we will have a document that ensures we are producing safe, decent, affordable housing without imposing unnecessary and costly requirements.

Sincerely,

Ryan Gleason
Executive Director

cc: Bill Beagle, Executive Director, Ohio Housing Finance Agency
Matt Sutter, Senior Director of Housing Programs, Ohio Housing Finance Agency
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