shks ARCHITECTS

Design Review Narrative + Departure Requests

Date: February 14, 2025

Subject: City of Bellingham: What-Comm 911 Design Review
Land Use Project #:

Narrative:

Site History + Current Use

The site, located at 620 Alabama Street in the Sunnyland neighborhood of Bellingham, Washington, was historically part of the B.B. & B.C. Railroad corridor, contributing to its unique shape within a residential context. It consists of two lots with a combined area of approximately 45,479 square feet (pending survey verification). Controlled access to the site is through a security fence with vehicular entrances on Iron Street and Texas Street and a locked person-gate located on the northwest side of the property. There are two existing structures on the site: the What-Comm 911 public safety access point (PSAP), which was originally constructed as a Fire Station in the 1950s and subsequently remodeled in 1989; and an abandoned fire training tower. Other site features consist of an emergency generator with associated fuel tank, mechanical equipment, and parking for employees and city vehicles. Landscaping is limited to flowering cherry trees, laurel hedges along the fence line, and street trees along Alabama. The footprint of the existing wood framed building is approximately 4,700 square feet and is topped with a radio antennae. Current uses include administrative office, mixed meeting and office spaces, building and employee support spaces, server room and dispatch room. The existing facility is undersized for What-Comm 911's present and future needs and does not meet current safety and system redundancy standards for a Category IV Essential Facility (IBC 1604.5) and per NFPA 1225.

Project Goals and Objectives

The City of Bellingham and What-Comm project team organized themselves around project goals and site priorities to address What-Comm's current and futures needs and create a facility that supports a healthy environment for employees and the neighborhood. These include:

- Provide a safe and secure facility
- Include redundant systems for continuous operation of the facility
- Provide opportunities for program flexibility to accommodate growth.
- Prioritize employee health and wellness
- Respond to neighborhood scale

Phasing + Siting:

Due to the critical function of What-Comm 911's operations, the site layout and new building massing emerged from a requirement to maintain full functionality of the existing facility through construction. To keep the existing public safety answering point (PSAP) accessible throughout construction, the new building and supporting site features are situated south of the existing facility. The tapering parcel and building setbacks from residential structures to the south of the site created program constraints which made certain spaces inefficient from an operations standpoint and presented security challenges, leading the building to be placed centrally in the parcel. To minimize changes to site access and circulation, the existing curb cuts at both Iron St. and Texas St. were maintained, locking in the southern limit of the building massing. The radio tower and generators were located on the north side of the new facility to collocate them and the spaces they serve while minimizing life

safety risks associated with tower fall and combustible liquids and visual impacts to the neighboring residential structures. Lastly, exterior employee wellness spaces and landscaped areas wrap the entire facility, creating a safe and secure environment for employees and acts as a vegetated buffer between this highly secure facility and the community it serves.

Building Form and Program

The building massing was generated out of the site constraints noted above, programmatic requirements for operational efficiency and a desire to respond to the residential character and commercial zoning adjacent to the site. These public parcels are located between commercial zones to the east and residential zones to the west. In response, the building massing was broken into two primary volumes with the smaller scaled volume located next to the residential neighbors and the larger scaled volume housing the open office space located across from the commercial property to the east. Even with this larger volume along the Iron Street frontage, the form is resonant of the residential gabled forms found elsewhere in the Sunnyland neighborhood, reducing the building's perceived scale as it slopes down from north to south. Parapets on both volumes have been extended to screen rooftop mechanical equipment and act as a guardrail for future maintenance while maintaining architectural continuity of the facades.

The City of Bellingham and What-Comm is exploring avenues to fund additional office space attached to the northwest corner of the smaller volume. If pursued, the general site approach will be maintained with ample buffer space between the residential properties and the new facility. See site plan A1.1 for outline of alternate building footprint.

Color + Materials

The site historically housed the B.B. and B.C. Railroad corridor which linked Bellingham Bay to the base of Mount Baker, carrying logs, cedar shakes, and the occasional passenger. This meeting of nature at one end and industry on the other inspired the palette of wood and metal on the building's exterior. At time of submission, the design team is exploring two material palettes which will be driven by budget, product availability, and long-term operational efficiency. See sheets A4.1-A4.2 for renderings and precedent imagery describing both palettes.

Wood with metal infill panels:

This palette uses vertically oriented wood boards with a subtly shifting pattern of widths to provide texture and break down the visual mass of the facades. 4" deep frames pair windows and a metal panel to increase the perceived size of the opening and add additional character to the façades. Pairing a light grey metal panel with a natural wood finish allows the material to silver over time creating a building that will change over time and settle into a unified palette.

Metal Panel with wood infill:

Using the same kit of parts above, this palette differs by inverting the material locations in the façade. Metal panel with a subtly shifting profile pattern as the primary material will provide a similar texture across the larger facades and the wood infill adjacent to the windows will soften the material palette and add visual warmth to the composition. Colors being explored are a dark bronze and a natural wood finish that will age well with the building.

Design Criteria:

Item	Subject		Remarks	Action by
Pre-Application Meeting Comments				
1.0	Pre-Application Meeting Comments	A	**BMC Zoning, Land Use, and Commercial Design Standards:** See sheet A0.2 for zoning, land use, design standard compliance	
		B	**Minimum Yards:** *"Minimum Yards: Per BMC 20.42.050(D)(1), all buildings or structures shall be located no closer than 20 feet from any property line abutting or across the street from land designated residential single, residential multi, or planned residential. Parking facilities shall be located no closer than 10 feet from any property line abutting or across the street from any residential designation; provided, however, that a driveway may be permitted within this required yard. Setback averaging is not applicable to this zoning.* *The site plan shown on Sheet A1.0 shows only a 17' building setback to the west property line. A 20' setback is required."* **Response:** See site plan for building setback compliance	
		C	**Building Height:** *"Building Height: There are no height limits in BMC 20.42. Height would be regulated through SEPA and Design Review if there was a proportional nexus to mitigate impact or comply with the design standards."* **Response:** See sheets A3.1 and A3.3 and for max building height and street elevations showing relationship to neighboring properties.	

Item	Subject		Remarks	Action by
		D	**Parking Quantity:** "Design and construction of parking facilities containing no less than the number of spaces required for similar privately owned uses shall be provided pursuant to standards set forth in BMC 20.12.010. Office uses require parking at a ratio of one for every 350 square feet of floor area; however, BMC 20.12.010(B)(3) allows the planning director to determine standards for uses not clearly defined. Parking spaces should be sized at the minimum allowed by code (8.5' by 15' with a 2' overhang into a landscape bed) in order to reduce hard surface." **Response:** See sheets A0.2 and A1.1 for parking calculations and layout.	

Item	Subject		Remarks	Action by
		E	**Landscaping Requirements** ***Screening:*** *"All yards required in subsection (D)(1) of this section, and storage areas visible from beyond the property line shall be screened as defined within BMC 20.12.030. Please review this code section for complete standards."* **Response:** See sheets L1.00 and A3.3 for proposed screening ***Steet Trees:*** *"Installation of street trees is required along Alabama Street and Iron Street at a spacing of one per 50'. Existing trees that are retained may be counted towards this ratio. Street trees should be located in the landscape strip on Iron Street."* **Response:** See sheet L4.00 for street tree layout and spacing. ***Tree Retention:*** *"Per BMC 16.60, a tree retention plan shall be required with the design review application. Removed significant trees (greater than 6" diameter) shall be replaced at a ratio determined by PCDD."* **Response:** See sheets TP1.00, TP1.01, and L4.00 for tree removal, tree retention, and proposed planting plan.	
		F	**SEPA:** SEPA review is required for the construction of an office building with more than 5,000 square feet of floor area and associated parking for up to 20 vehicles. BMC 16.20.090(D). The proposed 100' radio tower is subject to SEPA review per WAC 197-11-800. **Response:** See SEPA document in attachments of application	

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		G	**LEED:** *"Per Resolution 2005-21, the City commits to meeting the LEED "Silver" rating for the construction of all new renovated City buildings over 5,000 square feet where the City provides the majority of funding."* **Response:** Project is on track for LEED silver certified.	
		H	**Acknowledgement of Departures:** *"The use is unique in that the building requires security and separation from the public realm. As a result, multiple departure requests will be needed from the design standards regarding building orientation to the street, continuous building wall, and blank walls/transparency."* **Response:** Please see departure requests and supporting diagrams below.	
		I	**Location and Extent of Parking:** *"The phasing needs of the project are a justifiable constraint, though replacing the existing building with a surface parking does not meet the intent of the requirement and in fact conflicts with requirements elsewhere in the commercial design standards regarding locating parking lots behind buildings and away from the street (BMC 20.25.090(B)(1)(b)).* *The parking lot north of the building should be deleted from the scope if parking needs can be satisfied with the spaces south of the building (the planning director is favorable to assigning a reduced ratio due to the specific/unique needs of the use). Generous landscaping and trees should be installed adjacent to Alabama and the perimeter fencing should be located as far south from the sidewalk as possible."* **Response:** Please see sheets A0.2 and A1.1 for parking conformance and location.	

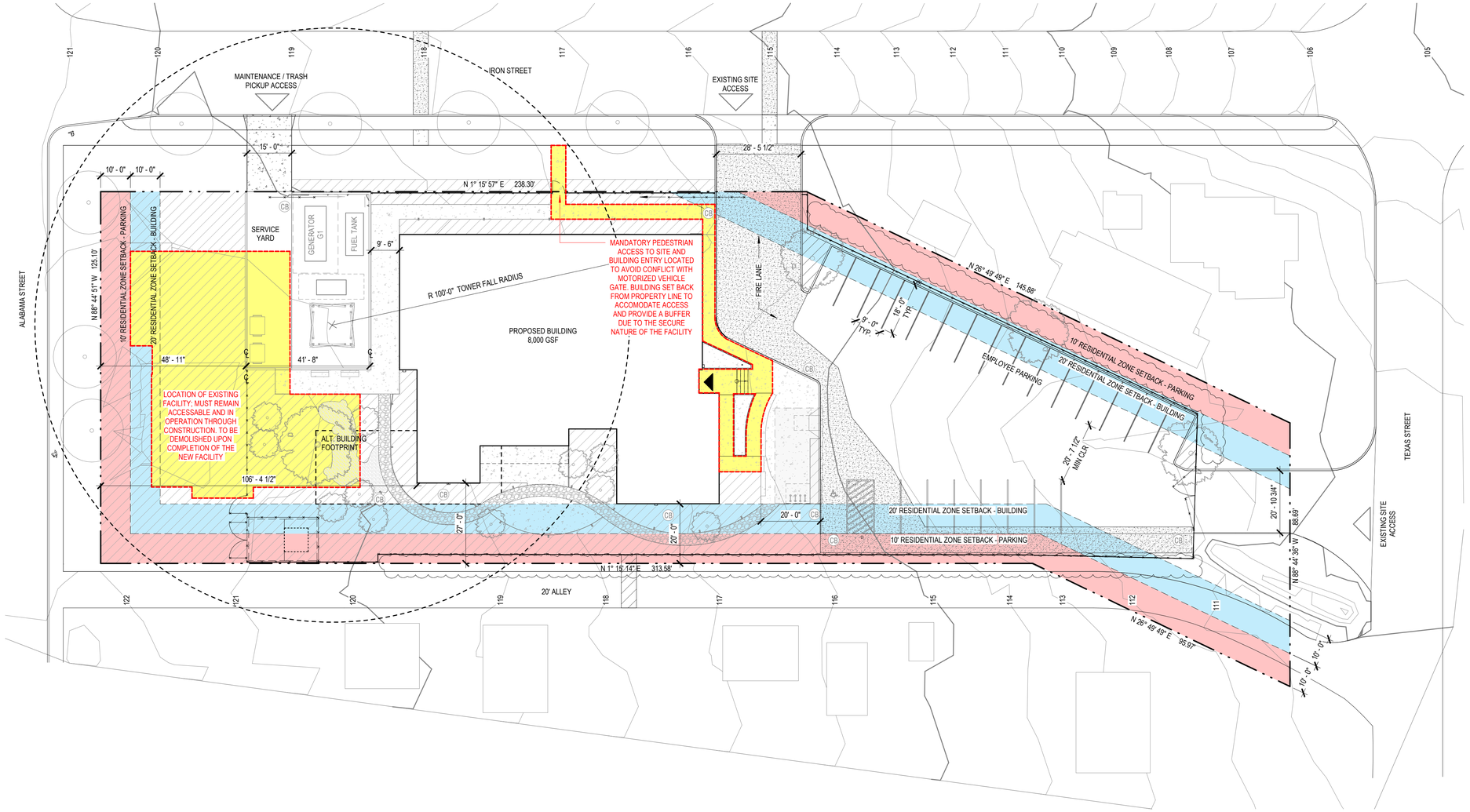
Item	Subject		Remarks	Action by
		J	**Radio Tower:** *"The proposed radio tower will need to be screened with landscaping and fencing to the highest extent feasible. Tall trees need to be planted around the tower as feasible to still allow signal transmission."* **Response:** See sheets A1.1, L4.00, and A3.3 for screening of the radio tower.	
		K	**Perimeter Fencing, Planting, and Pedestrian Access:** *"This project is unique in that it requires security and separation from the public realm. As a result, the perimeter fencing will be what interfaces with the public realm, and therefore, high quality design is needed (See BMC 20.25.090(B)(2)(c)(ii). The applicant may consider incorporating the 1% for the arts project into the fence design like the Water Treatment Facility or provide public art within the landscape buffer along Alabama Street.* *The existing hedge along the property line with 615 Texas Street should be maintained in accordance with BMC20.25.090(B)(1)(b)(iii) and (2)(c)(i).* *Pedestrian connections are needed from Iron Street into the parking area south of the building. If feasible, a pedestrian connection should be provided from the north entrance of the building to the street (either Alabama or Iron) as well (BMC 20.25.090(B)(5)).*" **Response:** See sheet A1.0, A1.1, C6.01, C6.02, C6.03 for new fence extents and details. To limit disturbance for residential properties to the west and southeast, the project is retaining as much of the existing laurel hedge and fence as feasible.	
		L	**Rooftop Mechanical Screening:** *"Rooftop mechanical equipment will need to be screened with either screen walls or parapets (BMC 20.25.090(B)(2)(b)."* **Response:** See sheets A3.1 and A3.2 for extent of extended parapets at roofs.	

Item	Subject		Remarks	Action by
		M	**Building Materials:** *"Changes in building material or color are needed to provide building modulation and reduce the impact of blank walls."* **Response:** See sheets A3.1 and A3.2 for material locations and types.	
Departure Requests:				
2.0	Departure Requests:	A	**Orientation to Street** **Buildings Oriented Toward Streets** (BMC 25.090.B.1.a.i): Buildings shall be oriented toward street frontages and located adjacent to the rights-of-way as closely as possible **Request:** We request a departure from this standard due to the requirement to keep the existing facility fully functional through construction and need to establish a secure perimeter around the new building. By maintaining the existing facility through construction, the new building is set back from the property line along Alabama Street by almost 49'. Once the existing building is demolished, the north side of the site will initially be planted with grass and more diverse planting will be added in the future in compliance with crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) principles. To provide pedestrian access from Iron Street that does not conflict with the vehicular access gate, an entrance and accessible path has been placed along the east side of the building. Facilitating access also has the added benefit of providing a planted buffer around the facility while further securing the site from potential threats. **Supporting Diagrams:** See diagram 2.0A/B at the end of this document.	

		B	**Orientation to Street** **Strong Building Wall Edge** (BMC 25.090.B.1.a.iv): Locate new structures to contribute to a strong building wall edge to the street such that they align at the front lot line and build out to the full width of the parcel, to the side lot lines or applicable set backs. Although small gaps may occur between some structures, these are the exception. This should not preclude the provision of a wider sidewalk, public space, landscaping, art, or outdoor seating. (See Figure 20.25.090(A).) **Request:** We request a departure from this standard due to the secure nature of the use, site phasing and relationship to other residential properties on the east side of the block. **Site Layout:** The need to keep the existing facility functional during construction and meeting the required parking count on the south portion of the site, the building can only push so far into the existing drive aisle before it constrains an ADA pedestrian pathway to the building along the south as well as grading requirements for the level of entry. **Use:** The highly sensitive and intense nature of telecommunicator work requires an environment where employees feel safe from outside threats and disturbances. Setting the building back from Iron Street ensures the PSAP's operations are maintained to the greatest extent possible and employees feel safe. **Adjacency:** NFPA 1225 Recommendations for PSAP buildings suggest a secure perimeter around the building of up to 80' for a blast radius. Given the site geometry, this is an impossibility in the east-west direction, so any buffer between the street and the building envelope reduces perceived risk of attack greatly. **Supporting Diagrams:** See diagram 2.0A/B at the end of this document.	

Item	Subject		Remarks	Action by
		C	**Mixed Residential and Commercial Site Design** **Ground Floor Commercial Space (**BMC 25.090.B.1.c.i) Ground floor commercial space shall comply with the commercial design standards in this section and be built with a minimum depth of 20 feet measured from the front face of the building and a minimum ceiling height of 12 feet. **Request:** We are requesting a departure from the ground level commercial space standard due to the secure nature of the building's use as a PSAP facility. No public commercial space can be accommodated on site.	
2.0		D	**Building Design** **Blank Walls** (BMC 25.090.B.7.b.i) Blank walls are not permitted when visible from a public street, public park, trail or a shared property line with residentially zoned property. **Request:** We are requesting a departure from the blank wall standard for the northeast corner of the facility. These areas house critical mechanical, electrical, and server rooms which do not have windows as a matter of security. These walls will have material and finish continuity of the rest of the building despite being behind screen planting and other site wall conditions. See sheet 1 and 5/A3.1 for exterior elevations and A3.3 for contextual street elevations. **Supporting Diagrams:** See diagram 2.0D/E at the end of this document.	

Item	Subject		Remarks	Action by
		E	**Building Design** **Transparency** (BMC 25.090.B.7.b.ii) A minimum of 60 percent of the building wall facing a public street, park, trail or plaza shall be transparent at a height between two feet and seven feet above grade. (See Figure 20.25.090(K).) **Request:** We are requesting a departure from this standard for the north and east facades due to the secure nature of this facility and need to protect critical electrical, mechanical and server systems to the greatest extent possible. The north elevation facing Alabama Street currently has 31.9% transparency and is held off of the street due to conditions noted above. Over 50% of this façade is opaque due to housing critical building and PSAP system infrastructure. The west façade along Iron Street has 34.9% transparency. The critical 24-hour use of the open office behind this façade requires having windows above head height, and the width of the windows have been reduced to reduce opportunities for glare in the space they serve. **Supporting Diagrams:** See diagram 2.0D/E at the end of this document.	



SITE PLAN LEGEND

- 10' PARKING SETBACK FROM RESIDENTIAL ZONE
- 20' BUILDING SETBACK FROM RESIDENTIAL ZONE (INCLUDES PARKING SETBACK)
- CONSTRAINT INFORMING DEPARTURE REQUEST, REFER TO NOTES ON DRAWING
- VEHICLE ENTRANCE
- BUILDING ENTRANCE
- FENCE
- PROPERTY LINE

1 SITE PLAN - DEPARTURE 2.0 A/B

SCALE: 1" = 20'-0"

0 5' 10' 15' 30' 60'

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CITY OF BELLINGHAM

WHAT-COMM 911

DESIGN REVIEW

620 ALABAMA STREET
BELLINGHAM, WA 98225

Drawn by:	CVH
Checked:	SHKS PM
Date:	02/07/25
Scale:	As indicated

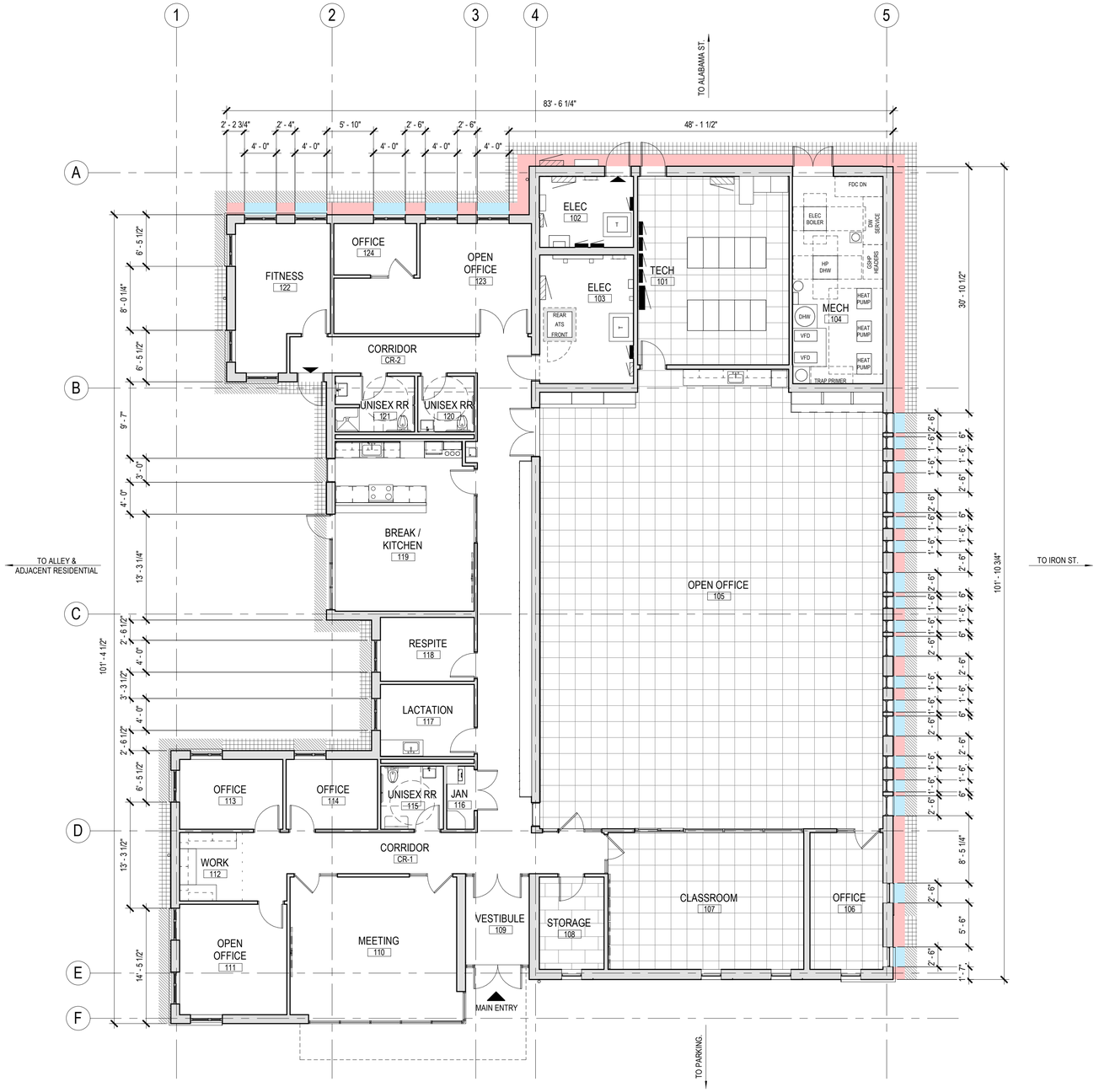
Revisions:

No.	Date	Remarks

NOT FOR CONSTRUCTION

SITE PLAN - 2.0 A/B

DR1.0



1 FIRST FLOOR PLAN - DEPARTURE 2.0 D/E

SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"

0 1' 2' 4' 8' 12'

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GENERAL NOTES

REFER TO SHEET A2.4.1 FOR WALL TYPES AND ASSEMBLIES

PLAN LEGEND

LOCATION OF PRIMARY CLADDING MATERIAL; REF A4.2 FOR MATERIAL PALETTE OPTIONS

LOCATION OF WINDOWS AND INFILL CLADDING MATERIAL; REF A4.2 FOR MATERIAL PALETTE OPTIONS

LOCATION OF SOLID WALL

LOCATION OF WINDOWS

DEPARTURE 2.0D - BLANK WALLS BMC 25.090.B.7.b.i

ELEVATION TYPE	LENGTH
NORTH	**83'-6"**
BLANK WALL LENGTH*	48'-2"
% OF TOTAL FACADE	**57.7%**
EAST	**101'-11"**
BLANK WALL LENGTH*	30'-10"
% OF TOTAL FACADE	**30.3%**
WEST	**101'-11"**
BLANK WALL LENGTH**	0'
% OF TOTAL FACADE	**00.0%**

*Blank wall here refers to a portion of facade lacking window openings or material changes.

**No significant blank walls on the west facade along residential-facing property line

DEPARTURE 2.0E - TRANSPARENCY (BMC 25.090.B.7.b.ii)

ELEVATION TYPE	LENGTH
NORTH	**83'-6"**
OPAQUE FACADE	63'-4"
TRANSPARENT FACADE	20'-2"
TRANSPARENCY %	**31.9%**
EAST	**101'-11"**
OPAQUE FACADE	66'-11"
TRANSPARENT FACADE	35'-0"
TRANSPARENCY %	**34.9%**

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CITY OF BELLINGHAM

WHAT-COMM 911

DESIGN REVIEW

620 ALABAMA STREET
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Drawn by: CVH
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Date: 02/13/25
Scale: 1/8" = 1'-0"

Revisions:

No.	Date	Remarks

NOT FOR CONSTRUCTION

FIRST FLOOR PLAN - 2.0 D/E

DR1.1