



THE CITY OF FIRCREST

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CITY OF FIRCREST

ADMINISTRATIVE DESIGN REVIEW – STEP 1 (CONCEPTUAL) STAFF REPORT

WHITTIER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL REPLACEMENT PROJECT

1. Whittier Elementary Administrative Design Review

- Project Name: Whittier Elementary
- File Number: 25-ADR-001
- Applicant: Tacoma Public Schools
- Property Owner: Tacoma Public Schools
- Site Address: 777 ELM Tree Lane, Fircrest, WA 98466
- Zoning District: R-4 (Residential-4 District)
- Comprehensive Plan Designation: PQPF (Public and Quasi Public Facilities)
- Review Type: Administrative Design Review (FMC 22.64; FMC 22.65; FMC 22.66)
- Contracted Staff: ETHOS PNW | Lindsey Sehmel, EMPA | AICP
- Report Date: 2/12/2026

2. REQUEST

The applicant requests Step 1 (Conceptual) Administrative Design Review (ADR) approval under the Fircrest Municipal Code for the replacement of Whittier Elementary School, including construction of a new two-story school building and associated site improvements (See Exhibits A–N).

3. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The proposal consists of a new approximately 45,105 square foot school building and associated site improvements as described in the Design Narrative (Exhibit D) and Code Analysis Sheet G-101 (Exhibit B). Site improvements include grading, parking modifications, pedestrian circulation improvements, plaza and outdoor play areas, landscaping, tree retention measures, streetscape frontage improvements, and screened service yard enclosures as illustrated in the Civil Drawings (Exhibit F), Landscape Site Plan (Exhibit H), Tree Preservation Plan (Exhibit G), and Service Yard Enclosure details (Exhibit M).

4. PROCEDURAL FRAMEWORK

This application is processed as Step 1 (Conceptual) Administrative Design Review pursuant to FMC 22.66. The applicant has elected the two-step ADR process. Step 1 establishes conceptual approval of the site layout, building massing, architectural character, circulation framework, open space configuration, and streetscape approach. Step 2 (Detailed) ADR is required prior to issuance of building permits to confirm detailed compliance (materials, lighting/photometrics, planting schedules, irrigation details, construction sections, and any departure findings as applicable).

Exhibit I

The applicant has also submitted Major Variance applications for building height and lot coverage and a Conditional Use Permit (CUP). These are separate land use actions subject to Hearing Examiner review. Step 1 ADR approval does not grant zoning relief and does not authorize development beyond adopted zoning development standards absent separate approval of the associated Major Variances and CUP (See Exhibit B).

5. APPLICABLE CODE

- FMC 22.64 – Design Guidelines
- FMC 22.65 – Streetscape Elements Design Standards and Guidelines (adopted by reference)
- FMC 22.66 – Administrative Design Review (approval criteria and departure standards)
- FMC 22.98 – Definitions (including definitions used for interpretation of Title 22 terms)

6. STAFF ANALYSIS

A. FMC 22.66 – Step 1 Conceptual Approval Standard

Under FMC 22.66.006, the Director must determine whether the proposal demonstrates conceptual consistency with applicable design guidelines and adopted streetscape standards. This Step 1 review evaluates conceptual consistency based on the materials submitted in Exhibits A through N.

B. FMC 22.64 – Design Guidelines

The applicant submitted a Design Review Compliance Checklist (Exhibit A) addressing each applicable guideline under FMC 22.64. The Design Narrative (Exhibit D) describes the architectural approach, massing articulation, and site integration strategy.

The Civil Drawings (Exhibit F) demonstrate building orientation and stepped finished floor elevations consistent with topographic constraints identified in the Environmental Site Analysis (Exhibit E). Architectural Elevations and Perspectives (Exhibits J, K, L, and N) illustrate massing modulation, roof variation, and material differentiation intended to reduce perceived bulk.

The Tree Preservation Plan (Exhibit G) identifies 67 significant trees on site, with 52 significant trees proposed to remain. The applicant indicates 77 percent retention, exceeding the minimum threshold identified in the submittal. Landscape integration is further documented in the Landscape Site Plan (Exhibit H).

The Landscape Site Plan (Exhibit H) identifies perimeter landscaping, street trees, planting islands, and plaza landscaping. While the conceptual planting layout demonstrates consistency with FMC 22.64 design intent, long-term maintenance of landscaping is critical to neighborhood compatibility and visual quality. Maintenance performance is not evaluated at Step 1; however, the City must ensure that installed landscaping remains viable and maintained over time.

Service areas and mechanical enclosures are conceptually screened as illustrated in the Service Yard Enclosure details (Exhibit M).

Exhibit I

B.1 CHECKLIST CONSISTENCY AUDIT

Staff reviewed the applicant's Design Review Compliance Checklist/Project Compliance Matrix (Exhibit A) criterion-by-criterion and confirms the following for the Step 1 ADR decision record:

- Natural Features / Trees (FMC 22.64.002): Checklist indicates trees preserved to the maximum extent feasible; tree preservation and protection measures are documented in Exhibit G and reflected on Exhibit H.
- Grading / Storm Drainage (FMC 22.64.003): Checklist identifies two finished floor elevations and underground stormwater facilities; conceptual grading approach is documented in Exhibit F and supported by Exhibit E.
- Landforms / Viewscales (FMC 22.64.004): Checklist ties terraced exterior improvements and stepped roof forms to the site's slope; architectural expression is illustrated in Exhibits J–L and N.
- Parking Lots and Areas (FMC 22.64.006): Checklist indicates existing parking retained with re-striping and EV infrastructure; circulation and parking configuration are shown in Exhibit F with EV infrastructure in Exhibit I.
- Parkways/Gateways/Bikeways/Sidewalks/Trails (FMC 22.64.007): Checklist describes frontage and connectivity improvements; conceptual frontage improvements are shown in Exhibit F and supplemented by Exhibit H.
- Building Heights (FMC 22.64.008): Checklist flags a deviation (major variance required). Zoning height allowance (30 feet) and proposed height (46'-9") are documented in Exhibit B and require Hearing Examiner action.
- Modulation/Articulation (FMC 22.64.009): Checklist flags a deviation related to prescriptive modulation intervals (front/side street facades). Conceptual articulation strategy is illustrated in Exhibits J–K and described in Exhibit D; detailed dimensional verification is deferred to Step 2.
- Building Entries (FMC 22.64.011): Checklist flags a deviation because the primary entry is set back from the street due to phasing and topography. Conceptual entry/plaza approach is illustrated in Exhibits J–L and discussed in Exhibit D; wayfinding/signage is deferred to Step 2.
- Accessory Structures (FMC 22.64.013): Checklist flags a deviation for the covered play structure roof material/approach; conceptual compatibility is illustrated in Exhibit K; final details deferred to Step 2.
- Solar Orientation (FMC 22.64.015): Checklist flags a deviation related to south-facing orientation of outdoor activities; conceptual solar strategy is described in Exhibit D; no additional Step 1 action required beyond acknowledgement.
- Outdoor Activity Space (FMC 22.64.031): Checklist provides plaza visibility/sun/wind narratives; conceptual performance support is provided in Exhibit E and design is shown in Exhibits F and H; public access/security fencing considerations remain CUP-related and are not resolved by ADR.
- Streetscape Furnishings (FMC 22.64.032) and Lighting (FMC 22.64.034): Checklist flags a deviation under lighting (22.64.034(a)). Step 1 acknowledges conceptual lighting approach; full photometrics, cut sheets, and glare verification are required at Step 2.
- Roadway Corridors/Frontages, Buffers, Sidewalks/Walkways, Buildings/Yards (FMC 22.64.035–.038): Checklist indicates compliance via landscape and existing vegetation; conceptual landscape approach is documented in Exhibit H; Step 2 to confirm installation details and irrigation.

Exhibit I

- Screening (FMC 22.64.039): Checklist flags a deviation for cover/screening of enclosures visible from above. Service enclosure approach is documented in Exhibit M; Step 2 to confirm final materials, heights, and visibility mitigation.

The deviations identified in Exhibit A are treated as conceptual design issues appropriate for Step 1 acknowledgment and Step 2 verification, except where a deviation reflects a zoning standard requiring separate Hearing Examiner action (e.g., height and lot coverage).

C. FMC 22.65 – Streetscape Standards

The Civil Drawings (Exhibit F) depict frontage improvements along Alameda Avenue, Elm Tree Lane, and Annapolis Street. These include sidewalk upgrades, curb ramps, crosswalk striping, and pedestrian connectivity improvements. The Design Narrative (Exhibit D) and Compliance Checklist (Exhibit A) reference the City’s adopted Streetscape Elements standards.

At a conceptual level, the plan demonstrates a streetscape approach consistent with FMC 22.65. Final dimensional verification and planting detail compliance will occur during Step 2 review.

D. Other Development Standard Compliance Issues

1) Major Variances (Height and Lot Coverage). The Code Analysis (Exhibit B) identifies zoning allowable height of 30 feet and proposed height of 46’-9”, and indicates that Major Variance approval is required. Lot coverage relief is also requested. These items are not resolved under ADR and require Hearing Examiner approval.

2) Signage. Exhibit A references signage at entries and the Response Matrix (Exhibit C) reflects City concerns regarding design review corrections. Permanent site and school signage permitting (final locations, dimensions, illumination, and design details) shall occur under Step 2 (Detailed) ADR and/or separate sign permit review, as applicable. Step 1 does not approve signage installation.

3) Utility vault / pad-mounted equipment in setbacks. Electrical Site Drawings (Exhibit I) indicate pad-mounted electrical equipment and/or vault infrastructure. Title 22 does not provide an explicit exemption for general utility cabinets from zoning development standards. FMC 22.98 defines an 'equipment enclosure' as a structure, shelter, cabinet, or vault used to house and protect equipment. Consistent with that definition, pad-mounted enclosures are reasonably interpreted as structures for purposes of Title 22 setback application. Step 2 shall verify setback compliance or require relocation/relief prior to building permit issuance.

E. Parking, Circulation, and EV Infrastructure

The Civil Drawings (Exhibit F) identify revised parking configuration and accessible routes. Electrical Site Drawings (Exhibit I) show EV charging and supporting infrastructure consistent with sustainability objectives described in the Design Narrative (Exhibit D).

7. FINDINGS OF FACT

1. Staff reviewed the complete Step 1 ADR record.
2. The applicant elected the two-step ADR process; this decision record addresses Step 1 (Conceptual) only.
3. The applicant’s Compliance Checklist (Exhibit A) identifies specific deviations and areas requiring Step 2 verification; staff has acknowledged those items and structured conditions accordingly.

Exhibit I

4. The proposal requires separate Hearing Examiner review of Major Variances for height and lot coverage (Exhibit B) and a Conditional Use Permit.
5. Signage permitting and final sign design/placement are deferred to Step 2 ADR and/or separate sign permits, as applicable.
6. Pad-mounted electrical equipment/vault enclosures shown on Exhibit I may constitute structures for Title 22 purposes and must comply with applicable setback standards or obtain relief prior to building permits.
7. With the conditions below, the proposal demonstrates conceptual consistency with FMC 22.64 and 22.65 sufficient for Step 1 approval.

8. CONCLUSION

Based on the record contained in Exhibits A through N and analysis under FMC 22.66, staff conclude that the proposal demonstrates conceptual consistency with the intent of FMC 22.64 and 22.65 sufficient to proceed to Step 2 Detailed Administrative Design Review, subject to conditions and separate Hearing Examiner approvals.

9. RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends APPROVAL of Step 1 (Conceptual) Administrative Design Review for the Whittier Elementary School Replacement Project, subject to the conditions below.

10. CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL

1. Applicant shall submit a Step 2 (Detailed) ADR application consistent with the conceptual plans contained in Exhibits A–N prior to issuance of building permits.
2. Approval of Step 1 ADR is contingent upon separate Hearing Examiner approval of the associated Major Variances (height and lot coverage) and CUP.
3. Step 2 submittal shall include final materials and finish schedules, dimensioned streetscape construction details, planting schedules, irrigation plans/details, and any required departure requests with findings support under FMC 22.66.006(b) as applicable.
4. Lighting: Step 2 shall include a photometric plan, fixture cut sheets, and glare/spill control documentation demonstrating compliance with FMC 22.64.034 and protection of adjacent residential properties.
5. Signage: All permanent site and school signage (including identification, directional, and illuminated signage) shall be reviewed and approved during Step 2 Detailed ADR and/or through separate sign permit review, as applicable. No permanent signage installation is authorized under this Step 1 ADR approval.
6. Utility vault / pad-mounted equipment: Placement of pad-mounted electrical equipment and utility enclosures shall be demonstrated to comply with applicable setback standards prior to building permit issuance. If not permitted by right, the applicant shall relocate equipment or obtain appropriate relief.
7. Landscaping maintenance: All required landscaping shall be permanently maintained in a healthy and viable condition. Dead, diseased, or damaged plant materials shall be replaced in kind within the next planting season. Maintenance obligations apply for the life of the development.

Exhibit I

11. EXHIBITS

- Exhibit A: Design Review Compliance Checklist (12/15/2025)
- Exhibit B: Code Analysis Sheet G-101 (12/12/2025)
- Exhibit C: First Round Comments Response Matrix (12/15/2025)
- Exhibit D: Design Narrative DRB (12/12/2025)
- Exhibit E: Environmental Site Analysis (12/12/2025)
- Exhibit F: Civil Drawings (12/12/2025)
- Exhibit G: Tree Preservation Plan (12/12/2025)
- Exhibit H: Landscape Site Plan (12/12/2025)
- Exhibit I: Electrical Site Drawings (12/12/2025)
- Exhibit J: Architectural Color Elevations (12/12/2025)
- Exhibit K: Architectural Color Perspectives (12/12/2025)
- Exhibit L: Architectural Color Perspectives – Street View (12/12/2025)
- Exhibit M: Service Yard Enclosure Details (12/12/2025)
- Exhibit N: Overall Exterior Building Elevations (12/12/2025)