

Elizabeth, CO: Frontier High School Re-Use and Re-Purposing

School District Property in need of transformation

Seeking ideas and input on how to best use a beloved facility.

Location:

The Town of Elizabeth is a statutory town in Elbert County on the outskirts of the Denver Metro area. It is home just under 2000 residents but is growing at over a 20% rate and expects to fill in to over 5000 residents, or more in the next decade or so. Originally a sawmill encampment, the town became a central hub of the ranching in the area, and though it still fills that need, the primary growth pressure comes from families seeking more affordable housing as well as a more spacious area to live. The average age of the community is quite young at 30 years of age, matching to some degree the youth of the metro area writ large. As with the balance of the metro area, affordable housing and workforce housing is a critical need. The former site of Frontier High School in the downtown area of Elizabeth offers an array of possible strategies for re-use, and it would be our intent to solicit input from the community and the stakeholders to assess what combinations of uses would best serve the community and the school district.



Frontier High School

Background:

The school was originally opened in 1920 and has undergone a series of additions and alterations in the years up to its closure in 2020. There are numerous issues presented by the structure, from ADA compliance, asbestos, structural concerns, and the challenge of taking a building from school to...whatever comes next! However, the three story (original) portion exudes great charm and is beloved by those who attended the school over the years and has been designated as historically significant by the town of Elizabeth. It will be up to a forward-looking community to preserve the facility in a way that it may become beloved by generations yet to come.

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The University Technical Assistance (UTA) Program at UCDenver, through a generous grant from the Department of Local Affairs (under the Supervision of Regional Manager Todd Leopold) has been contacted to provide design and planning services to the Elizabeth School District. We met on April 26th with School Superintendent Dan Snowberger. On hand from the UTA program were Jeffrey Wood and various members of the UTAP team (Abe Martin, Hunter Wahlgren, Michelle Lazarz and Theresa Khoury). We discussed the possible strategies for re-use (among other things, an early childhood development program, workplace housing, school district offices, adult learning center, and given the existing infrastructure perhaps a recreation center). We also discussed how we might best involve the community for comments, opinions, and other forms of public engagement. The property includes the school buildings, a well-maintained gymnasium, a large grass field, playground equipment (in need of replacement) and an adjacent parking area. We met at the school and toured the entirety of the premises.

The Project:

Though the gymnasium is utilized for various activities, the balance of the building is currently unused, complicating the insurability of the complex (30% of the floor area needs to be utilized in order to avoid being treated as “abandoned”. Hence there is some urgency to make improvements such that the childcare center might be made operational sooner rather than later. After that, a careful and creative assessment of the range of possibilities as measured against the most pressing needs of the community should ensue. Public meetings, online surveys and various presentations to the many potential stakeholders will ensure that whatever the result, it is in the best interest of the community.

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Upon initial inspection, the following issues came to light (not a comprehensive list):

- [] Myriad ADA compliance issues, with insufficient ramps, steps, and level changes throughout the building.
- [] The existing sewer system should be assessed (by others) in order that we understand any impact that might have on our decision making. (Housing in all configurations will create the need for many additional restrooms, etc.)
- [] An array of ideas should be considered without prejudice. A written survey might get the ball rolling after a period of brainstorming in which a comprehensive range of ideas can be entertained. Workforce Housing (to help draw teachers, firefighters, police, and other civil employees to the area), a recreation center, a coffee house, a continuing education center, childcare, a business incubator, an office complex, even a Nursing Home, were nominally discussed in the hour-long meeting...but clearly with more time and more input many more good ideas will emerge. Given the range of spaces, it is quite possible that many can be accommodated, hence it is important to assess which uses would cohabitate well and which uses ought to be considered elsewhere.
- [] There was a study of regional housing issues done recently and that should be reviewed for ideas and opportunities to provide solutions.
- [] Could sustainable energy sources be used for heat, electrical power, etc. in order to make the project more attractive to various funders. There is ample roof area for almost any amount of solar power generation.
- [] One challenge will be to bring in natural light to the inner core of the building which is large with comparatively little exterior wall area. Light wells, courtyards, and such interventions could make the inner spaces far more desirable...this will also help us in terms of sustainability issues.
- [] The designs should take the form of a MASTER PLAN approach, whereby we look at the entire facility and how it might be transformed over a number of years and steps that would entail a vision of the various pieces so that they might be prioritized and placed into service over time as funds and needs become clearer.
- [] The historic status of the older portion of the building should be assessed (via a preliminary HSA) in order to examine other funding streams and general cultural value to the state and the immediate area.

Our proposed work will entail the following steps:

Step One:

Site Reconnaissance and documentation, as well as inventory/brainstorming of project opportunities.

Step Two:

Develop and work with stakeholders to create a detailed resident/user survey. Develop (2-4) concepts addressing our initial findings, which might allow the survey to be more illustrative and perhaps excite the imaginations of the populace. These ideas would include pros and cons of various approaches, with an eye toward costs, funding sources and establishing the level of urgency or importance, as well as phasing opportunities. We believe a community survey would assist us with clarifying uses the residents would like to have included in the master plan. Upon receipt of survey data, we would provide analysis, as well as the raw data, for use and discussion with and by the school district and other stakeholders.

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Step Three:

We will develop 1 to 3 more fully developed concepts that will address the concerns and thoughts generated out of our meetings with stakeholders as well as from the surveys. This will include a more comprehensive Opinion of Cost as well as interior and exterior renderings as we deem necessary to clearly explain the concepts and give the stakeholders their first glimpse into the new facility. The end product of this stage will lead to a presentation to the community and interested public who may emerge as fundraising sources and will be invited to participate in the design process in order that they retain a sense of ownership of the facility.

Step Four:

Community Meeting/Presentation (2-4 Meetings total): Offer a detailed analysis of the project in order to facilitate meaningful dialogue to determine community support. This will be a multimedia presentation (PowerPoint, printed exhibits and even handouts made available to attendees) given by the student-employees of the UTAP. (NOTE: at the conclusion of the design phase, we may either present to the school district or hold a second community meeting in which we detail the results of the process)

Step Five:

Final Refinement is based on stakeholder's wishes, costs, and any additional input from the community. At the conclusion of this we will provide final drawings and a summary of the process and steps taken to arrive at the selected scheme, in the form of a document that can be distributed to grantors and funding resources. The final and comprehensive report (document) would be assembled and printed for final publication and **presented to the community** and stakeholders in various formats (hard copy, digitally, etc.).

Process/Services to be provided:

- Documentation of all amenities and spaces suitable for development.
- Prepare schematic diagrams indicating locations, photographs, drawings, adjacencies, and other exhibits intended to describe the project and the possible alternative solutions.
- Prepare presentations to stakeholders and eventually to general public for review and comment to generate comment, additional ideas, and garner/gauge support for project.
- Cost Estimation (ongoing)
- Design Development Drawings (for use for cost estimation and fabricators)
- Produce summary of our findings (drawings and estimates), for grant support and to assist the stakeholders and county in deciding how best to proceed.

Note we will also need use of whatever meeting space is deemed appropriate for presentation to community. Though we are happy to assist with preparation of the notice for the meeting (if needed), we will rely on the county and stakeholders to take whatever steps are needed to notify the widest possible audience. We anticipate a total of 2 “in process” public presentations and one final presentation to town showing the resulting design. (Actual number may vary for many reasons).

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Work is intended to be schematic in nature. The UTA cannot stamp or sign or issue drawings for construction under their own title and would need others, if/as acceptable to take over responsibility for permit/construction drawing completion when deemed necessary at the sole discretion of the UTA.

It is hoped that meetings can be coordinated to minimize redundancy but managed in order to be productive (small-sized meetings are more conducive to more detailed discussions, whereas larger issues can easily be presented at larger gatherings). We anticipate two to three stakeholder meetings (included in this budget) in addition to the community-wide presentations, but more may be required.

Work is supervised by Jeffrey Wood, UCDenver Community Development Coordinator/ University Technical Assistance Program (in conjunction with other professionals within the program), and prepared by undergraduate and graduate level Landscape Architecture, Planning and Architecture design interns from the College of Architecture and Planning in Denver.

Timetable

It is estimated that work can begin with initial documentation upon acceptance of this scope of work and the execution of a suitable Memo of Understanding (note: our fees would be split in some fashion with DOLA [Department of Local Affairs] and would not be payable until our work is completed). Depending on the availability of various members of the college leadership and staff, and related stakeholders, as well as engineers, contractors, and other interested parties, (including student availability and schedule) the UTA portion of the work should take roughly 9-12 months, with a projected endpoint on or about May 1st, 2024. (Note: subsequent/additional phases would be addressed in additional MOU's as warranted or requested by stakeholders.)

Budget

The work will be billed to ELIZABETH SCHOOL DISTRICT at completion of the final work. It is estimated that work on this project will require \$6,475 to cover the staff work, travel expenses, follow-up review and preparation/printing of the final documents. Work is divided by task and DISTRICT-DOLA contribution as follows:

Projected Total Project Cost	\$6,475
DOLA Match (40%)	\$2,590
ELIZABETH SCHOOL DISTRICT (60%share)	\$3,885

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