



Los Alamos County

Community Development Department

PLANNING & ZONING COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

Public Hearing Date: March 26, 2025
Subject: Case No. SIT-2025-0071
Applicant/Owner: Anthony Strain and Russell Naranjo, Project Managers with Los Alamos County Capital Improvements and Facilities Division, on behalf of Los Alamos County, Property Owner
Case Manager: Jane Mathews, Senior Planner

Professional Background:

Dual Master's Degree in City and Regional Planning, and Landscape Architecture; 26 years in Regional Planning, Land Use, Transportation Planning, and Placemaking; six years in Local Government Zoning, Platting, and Development Case Management.

Case No. SIT-2025-0071: Los Alamos County Capital Improvements and Facilities Division, on behalf of Los Alamos County, property owner, is requesting Site Plan approval to renovate the Manhattan Project Era Dormitory Building, an existing 2-story building previously noticed as the "Women's Dorm Building", to serve as a visitor center with historical and educational exhibits, related office space, and a Caretaker Unit; and construction of a 560 Sq. Ft. detached restroom facility with picnic pavilion. The property, EA3 U, is addressed 1725 17th Street and is within the Institutional (INS) zone district.

See Attachment A: Application Submittal.



Image 1: Google Earth Street Image, Dec. 2022 – Women's Dorm Building west elevation facing 18th Street

BACKGROUND

The subject property ("Property"), addressed as 1725 17th Street, is located within the Eastern Area 3 Subdivision and is bounded by streets on all sides: N Sage, 17th Street, Peach Street, and 18th Street. The neighborhood is bounded by the collector streets of Canyon Road (north), 15th Street (east) and Nectar Street (south). The lot is 50,529 Sq. Ft. and is occupied by a two-story, 5,462 Sq. Ft. building, constructed to serve the Manhattan Project. In the mid-1940s, the building operated as a dormitory. More recent research indicates that while this building is a valuable and well-preserved example of Manhattan Project-Era architecture, there is no verification of being a Civilian or Army Women's Dorm Building. In 2019 the Christian Science Church approached the county about their desire to sell the property. Shortly thereafter, Los Alamos County Council approved the purchase and closed on the sale (2020). Los Alamos County will pursue listing with the National Register of Historic Places for this rare and unique building.

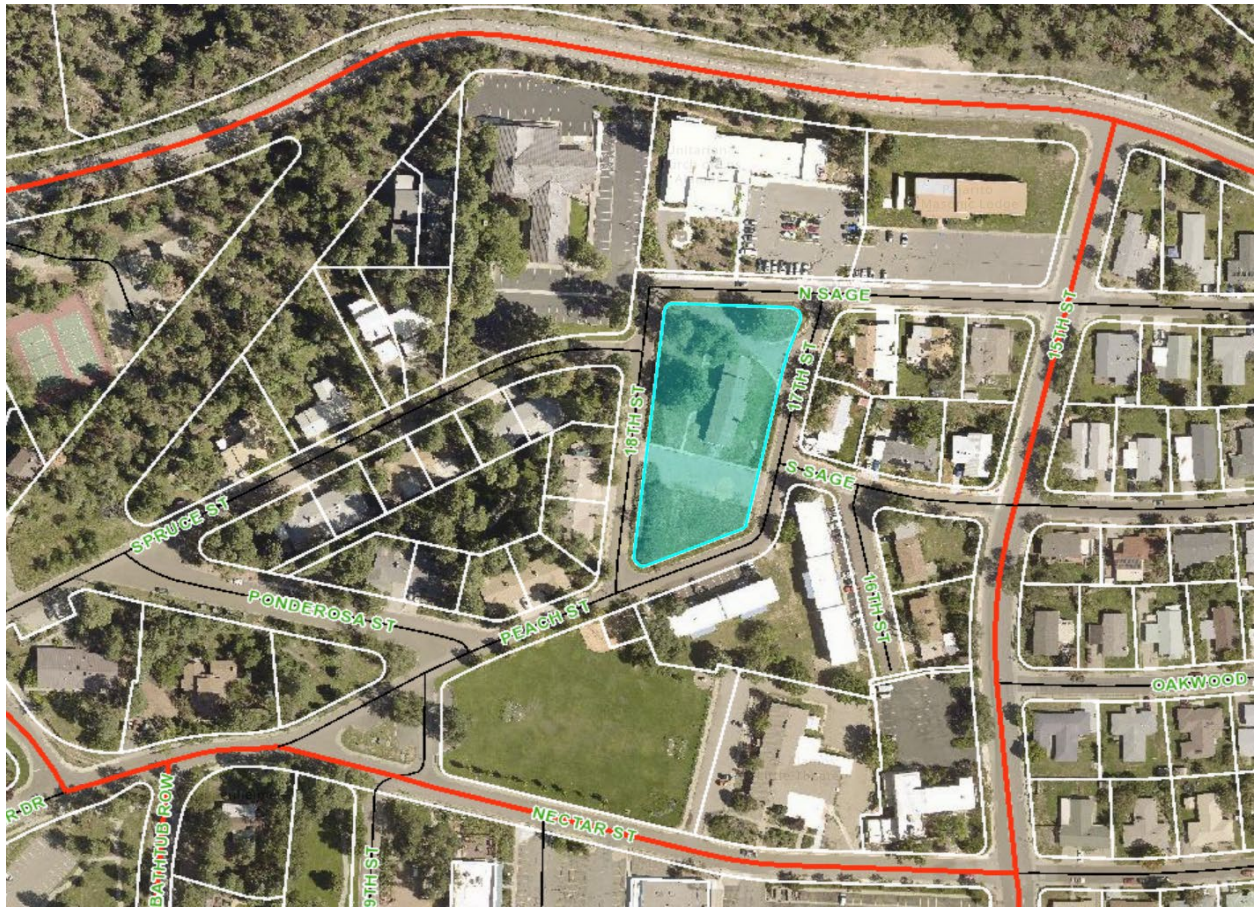


Figure 1: Location Area Map, Collector Streets shown in red

SUMMARY

In 2021, the county contracted Mullen-Heller Architecture to conduct public engagement through a series of public meetings to determine best use for the property. Four conceptual plans were presented to the public and one was selected. In 2022, County Council approved the proposal to renovate the building into a visitor center, museum, associated office space, and a caretaker's unit to house the Manhattan Project National Historical Park. The Minor Zone Map Amendment application to rezone the property from a residential land use designation went to Planning & Zoning Commission in July, and to County Council in August, 2024, allowing the Site Plan Application to move forward with uses typical of Institutional (INS) Zone District Standards.

The Site Plan application proposes significant improvements: parking, lighting, site circulation, and landscaping, plus visitor amenities are part of a thoughtful site renovation. All existing curbs, gutters, and sidewalks will be removed and replaced. At the north side of the site, a one-way driveway for bus drop-off (and refuse/recycle pick-up) will enter from 17th Street and exit onto 18th Street. It features a bus drop-off area with a crosswalk to the building, adjacent to a queuing area, sidewalk, and lawn area along N. Sage Loop. The main parking lot is at the south side of the

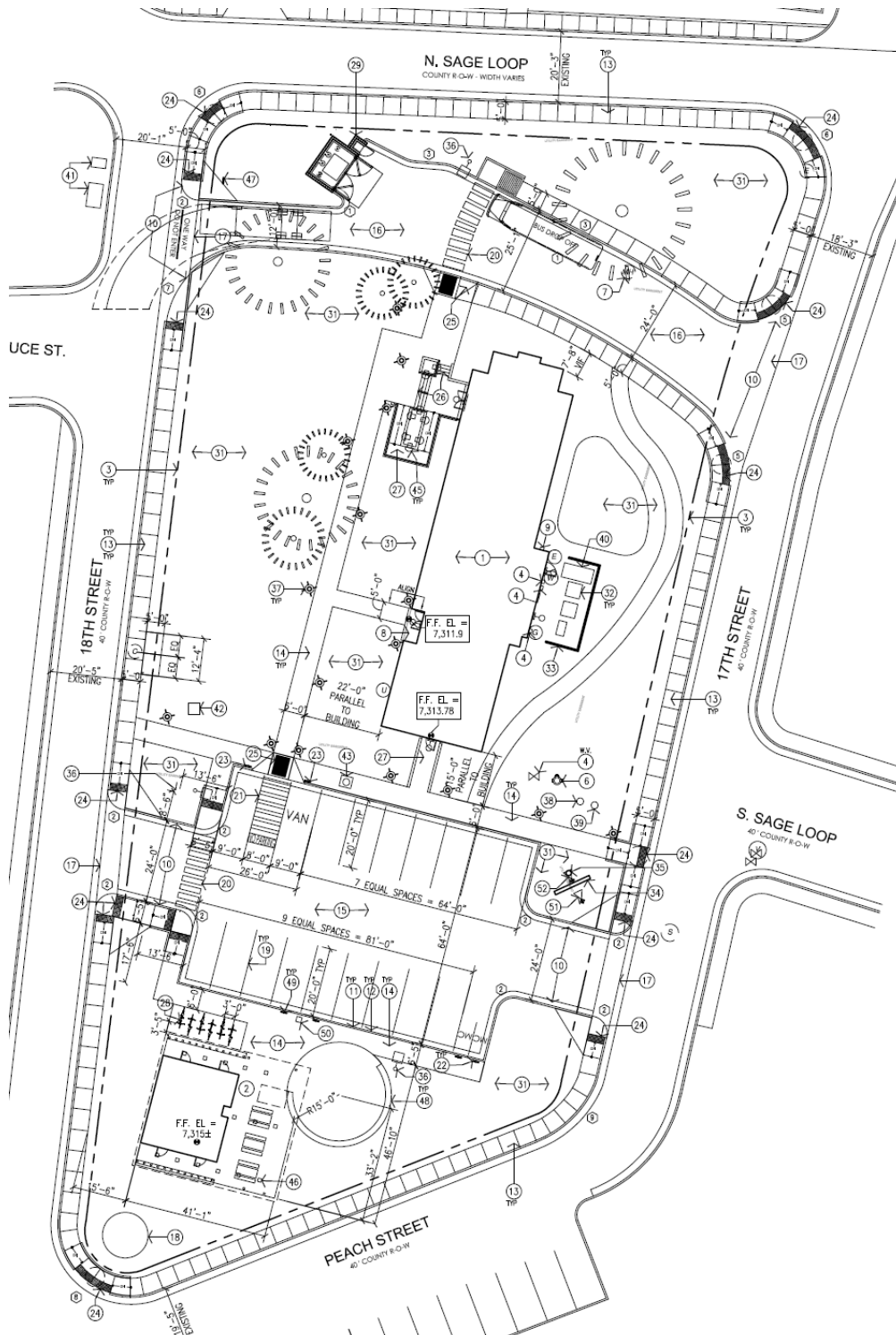


Figure 2: Site Plan

building, with entrances from both 17th and 18th Streets. The southmost end of the site includes a bike rack, restroom facility with picnic pavilion (560 Sq. Ft.), and a circular concrete bench seating area surrounded by extensive landscaping. The site's mature pine trees will be retained, per the architect and landscape plans. Much of the aged evergreen shrubbery will be removed to accommodate site development.

Exterior and interior architectural features will match historical photographs as much as possible. The exterior siding of the building will be repaired as needed and repainted to match historical photographs; an existing asphalt shingle roof will be replaced with a new synthetic composite shake roofing; Doors, windows and associated frames will remain and be repaired as necessary. The first floor, 3,390 Gross Sq. Ft., will be renovated to serve as a National Park Service visitor center and offices. The second floor, 2,073 Gross Sq. Ft., will feature museum exhibition space and a National Park Service caretaker's unit. Before the National Park Service occupies the site, a Conditional Use Permit will be required pursuant to the Institutional Zone District Standards within Section 16-7(d)(1)-b, to allow the contracted use by the National Park Service.

A presentation of this Site Plan Application was made to the Historic Preservation Advisory Board (HPAB) on February 5th, 2025, for their recommendation to the Planning and Zoning Commission, and to solicit their assistance in obtaining local listing with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO). HPAB members moved to support the project to inform the Planning and Zoning Commission of their recommendation.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL REVIEW COMMITTEE (IDRC) REVIEW

The Interdepartmental Review Committee (IDRC) met to review the site plan documents and application request on August 1, 2024. Armando Gabaldon, Environmental Services Manager, shared that the enclosure area is not large enough for both refuse and recycle. The Applicant can address design standards for enclosures to ensure size at the building permit phase. The Department of Public Utilities foresees no burdens to the utility system but stated that three-phase power will be needed for the operation of an elevator in the structure. The Public Works Department, County Engineer, noted that traffic analysis is not necessary, but he would like the Applicant to present possible trips based on the National Park Services trending numbers for tourism.

See Attachment B: IDRC Minutes and Memorandums

PUBLIC NOTICE

The *Los Alamos County Code of Ordinances, Chapter 16 – Development Code, Sec. 16-72(c) Notifications*, sets forth the requirements for proper notice to the public for a public hearing:

- *Published and Posted Notice [16-72(c)(4)]:*
 - Notice published in a newspaper of general circulation within the County at least 14-calendar days before the meeting or hearing. **Published March 6, 2025.**
 - The posting of at least one sign on a street abutting the property that is the subject of the application – visible from the street – for at least 14-calendar days before the public meeting or hearing. **Posted March 4, 2025.**
- *Mailed Notice [16-72-(c)(5)]:*
 - Mailed notice 14-days prior to the public hearing to all owners of record as identified in the records of the County Tax Assessor or occupants of properties within 300 ft., excluding public rights-of-way, of exterior lot lines of the subject property. **Mailed Certified on March 11, 2025.**

The notices specified that the public hearing would be located at 1000 Central Ave, Los Alamos, NM, with an option for the public to provide comment virtually, via Zoom.

See Attachment C: Public Notices

SITE PLAN ADOPTION DECISION CRITERIA

Section 16-74(i)(4) of the Los Alamos County Development Code states that a Site Plan shall be approved if it meets all of the following criteria:

- a. The Site Plan substantially conforms to the intent and policies of the Comprehensive Plan and other adopted County policies and plans.**

Applicant Response: The proposed site plan substantially conforms to the Comprehensive Plan:

- 1) Supporting the efforts to market and brand Los Alamos as a scenic destination featuring recreation, science, and history, attract new tourism-related business, and revitalize areas of Los Alamos and White Rock to maximize the use of County owned land. Potential strategy mentioned in the Comprehensive Plan "Partner with the National Park Service and others to promote Los Alamos County as an outdoor recreation destination".
- 2) Growth:
 - a. Maximize our opportunity with respect to the development of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park.
 - b. Capitalize on Los Alamos County's role as a gateway to three national parks.
 - c. Enhance community pride.
- 3) Redevelopment:
 - a. Often involves updating or replacing old, substandard structures with new, healthier living environments that meet current building codes.
 - b. The Manhattan Project National Historical Park has outgrown its current location in Los Alamos County to the point that staff and exhibits are divided into two separate locations. This project will allow the Manhattan Project National Historical Park to expand their efforts and combine into one central location as a redevelopment project.
 - c. Upgrading the traffic circulation patterns and parking will improve safety for pedestrians, cyclists, drivers and the public alike.
 - d. Through code compliance efforts, the project will ensure that the new development meets current safety codes and regulations.

Staff Response: The Comprehensive Plan adopts goals and policies to direct and promote growth within the community and ensure its success. It is the staff's expert opinion that this criterion has been met because the project contributes to the strategic focus areas "of extreme importance" identified on Page 34. This project supports at least one (1) goal in each of these strategic focus areas:

ECONOMIC VITALITY:

- Market and brand Los Alamos as a scenic destination featuring recreation, science and history
- Maximize the utilization of County-owned land

FINANCIAL STABILITY:

- Attract new tourism-related businesses

The Comprehensive Plan has three (3) core themes to further the County's goals, policies, and strategies. Growth is one of these core themes. The Manhattan Project National Historic Park is expected to bring significant growth in tourism, and, with it, a corresponding increase in economic development. Renovating the vacant building and site to accommodate the National Park Services efforts supports Growth Goals to, "Maximize our opportunity with respect to development of the Manhattan Project National Historic Park".

Supported Land Use Policies within Page 71, 77, and 81 of the Comprehensive Plan include:

GROWTH:

- Maximize the utilization of County-owned land

DEVELOPMENT:

- Promote coordination of economic development and community development among County Departments, as well as with all levels of government, the business community and nonprofits, to strengthen industry clusters.

REDEVELOPMENT:

- Address abandoned or blighted properties

b. If the subject property is within an approved Master Plan, the Site Plan is in conformance with any relevant standards in the Master Plan.

Applicant Response: The property is not located within an approved Master Plan; the Site Plan is in conformance with any relevant standards in the Master Plan.

Staff Response: Not applicable.

c. If the subject property is within an approved PD zone district, the Site Plan is consistent with any applicable terms and conditions in any previously approved PD zoning covering the subject property and any related development agreements and/or regulations.

Applicant Response: Not applicable.

Staff Response: Not applicable.

d. The Site Plan is in conformance with all applicable provisions of this Code and other adopted County regulations.

Applicant Response: The proposed site plan follows regulations within Chapter 16 of the Los Alamos Development Code for the INS (Institutional) zoning designation. The existing structure meets ground level setbacks (zero-feet required) while providing for proper sidewalk dimensions and landscaped areas per the development code.

- 1) Site design: The setbacks within the INS zone are -0-, the maximum lot coverage is 70%, the maximum building height is 50' and the parking is called out in the site plan. This application fully complies with all site design criteria for the zone district.

- 2) Landscape: the existing site contains many mature trees and established landscaping. Efforts will be made to preserve these established areas to the greatest extent possible. Improvements will be made to enhance existing mature landscaped areas and create new areas in accordance with the requirements set forth in the code near and around the perimeter of both the existing structure and proposed pavilion and restroom facility. The requirements set forth in the code require a minimum of 10% net site area. This application fully complies with the landscape criteria for the district.
- 3) Lighting: Outdoor lighting will be designed in compliance with the Dark Skies and Los Alamos County outdoor nighttime lighting standards. Outdoor lighting on the site is limited to that which is useful, targeted, and not brighter than necessary. Parking lot lighting shall be equipped with motion sensors that dim the entire luminaire after a 15-minute period when no motion is detected. The proposed correlated color temperature shall not exceed 2700 K. The proposed fixtures will be fully shielded and possess a U rating.
- 4) Parking: the required parking for the site is provided with on-site surface parking. Standard and accessible parking stalls are sized per the development code.
- 5) Signage: The monument sign is depicted on the site plan as a location on the SE portion of the site plan. The actual sign has not yet been designed, however, will comply fully with the parameters set forth in the code.

Staff Response: It is the staff's expert opinion that this criterion has been met because each of the following elements of the Development Code have been satisfied by the proposal:

ZONING & USE: The proposed use of the property as a Visitor Center (Institutional/Civic Building), museum, and a caretaker unit, meets the intention of the Institutional (INS) Zone District, as outlined within *Section 16-7(d)*. The use regulations, *Section 16-14, Table 26: Permitted Use Table*, identifies "Art Gallery, Museum, or Library", and "Institutional and Civic Buildings" as permitted within the INS Zone District. Also, Table 26 lists a "Caretakers Unit" as an Accessory Use within the INS Zone District, which is limited by Use-Specific Standards, *Section 16-18-(c)*, to one per lot.

DIMENSIONAL STANDARDS: The proposed site plan meets the dimensional standards for the INS Zone District including setbacks (0'), lot coverage (70%), and building height (50').

ACCESS & CONNECTIVITY: Article IV, Division 2. Access and Connectivity applies to all developments. The site design was reviewed by the County Engineer and Fire Marshal's Office and access was agreed to be sufficient for the intended use. All existing curbs, gutters, and sidewalks will be removed and replaced according to the County Public Works standards, and the site is designed with pedestrian walkways and crosswalks for safe connectivity throughout. Landscaping and signage will not interfere with the Clear Sight Triangle because signs, walls, trees and shrubbery 3-ft and above are noted to not be within the area.

PARKING STANDARDS: Article IV, Division 3. Off-Street Parking, Loading, and Queuing, provides for adequate, convenient, and safe off-street parking and loading areas. Parking design, dimensions, and location comply with Development Standards. Off-Street Parking calculations are based on the gross floor area of each subject use and rounded to the nearest whole number. Attachment A, Sheet A001, Architectural Site Plan, demonstrates that off-street parking requirements have been met.

| Parking Type | Required | Provided |
|---------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Off-Street Spaces (Total) | 17 | 18 |
| ADA (Total) | 1 | 2 |
| ADA Van Accessible | 1 | 2 |
| Motorcycle Spaces | 0 | 2 |
| Bicycle Spaces | 6 | 6 |

LANDSCAPING & SCREENING: Article IV, Division 4. Landscaping and Screening requirements do not apply to this application because it is not new construction, and the construction of the restroom and picnic pavilion does not expand the site more than 25% of the existing building floor area. However, a Landscaping Plan has been submitted to enhance the appearance of the site and illustrate that the Ponderosa Pines in the northwest area will remain; the total landscaping meets the minimum 10% net site area requirements. Also, mechanical and electrical equipment east of the building will be screened by an 8-ft wood fence and refuse containers will be enclosed and are subject to county standards at the building permit phase.

NEIGHBORHOOD PROTECTION STANDARDS:

Article IV, Division 5. Neighborhood Protection Standards apply to non-residential uses abutting or adjacent to protected lots, such as the following zone districts: RA, RE, SFR, and RM. As the Property is adjacent to protected lots (SFR) protection standards are required as applicable:

Building Height. Any portion of a primary building within 75-ft of any lot line that is adjacent to a protected lot shall step down to a maximum of 35-ft. As shown in Attachment A, Sheet A401, Exterior Elevations, existing building is 25'-11", not including the chimney which is excluded from building height, and it is not being increased.

Landscape Buffer. A landscape buffer is required along the shared property lines of abutting developments. As the Property is bounded on all sides by a county street, this regulation does not apply.

OUTDOOR LIGHTING: Article IV, Division 6. Outdoor Lighting applies because a new use is being proposed for the property. Attachment A, Sheet E001, Lighting Plan, shows lighting fixtures with a correlated color temperature at 2700K. Fixtures are proposed to be fully shielded and possess a U0 rating for zero upright. Subject to rezone approval, the property will be classified within Lighting Zone 2 (LZ2), Ambient Lighting. Lighting shall be dimmed by 50% by 10:00 p.m., or one (1) hour after close of business (whichever comes first).

WALLS, FENCES AND GATES: A new 8' wood fence is planned and shown on Attachment A, Sheet A401, Exterior Elevations, to screen mechanical equipment on the east side of the building. The proposal meets the Development Standards of Article IV, Division 7. Walls, Fences, and Gates.

SIGNAGE: A monument sign location is proposed north of the 17th Street parking lot access and demonstrates a clear sight triangle. Prior to placement, a Sign Permit will be required to ensure Sign Development Standards.

- e. The County's existing public infrastructure and services, including but not limited to water, sanitary sewer, electricity, gas, storm sewer, streets, trails and sidewalks have adequate capacity to serve the proposed development, and any burdens on those systems have been mitigated in compliance with the County's construction standards to the maximum extent practicable.**

Applicant Response: Public services and facilities required to serve the proposed development have adequate capacity and would conform with the requirements of the County's construction standards. A Pre-application meeting with relevant County departments occurred on April 4, 2024. Utilities are both available and existing, and currently on-site, and have adequate capacity to serve the project. Improvements will be made to improve the existing sidewalk system which may involve the construction of new sidewalks and improvement of the existing sidewalks. All improvements will be made in accordance with Americans with Disability Act (ADA) standards.

Staff Response: It is the staff's expert opinion that this criterion has been met because the Department of Public Utilities has communicated that proposed utilities will adequately serve the proposed development (water, sanitary sewer, electricity, gas). Specific details on hydrant tie-in and electrical 3-phase services will be needed when building permits are submitted. The drainage patterns will not be significantly altered and are satisfactory to the County Engineer. The County Engineer did not require a Traffic Impact Analysis but suggests that the project consider evaluating potential bus trips based on the National Park Service (NPS) trending numbers for tourism. However, the NPS does not bus within Los Alamos so those numbers could be wildly inconsistent with what may occur at this location.

f. The Site Plan mitigates any significant adverse impacts to properties within the vicinity to the maximum extent practicable.

Applicant Response: Several public meetings were held in 2022 with an additional neighborhood meeting as part of the "Zoning Amendment" application process was held on May 2, 2024. The renovations to the property will be typical of a construction site. Staff have assured neighbors that the code will be followed to enforce the hours of construction operation activity and noise levels.

The site plan mitigates any significant adverse impacts on adjacent properties through a combination of screening and shielding of light fixtures, mechanical equipment, and parking. Due to the intention of Los Alamos County to pursue listing with the National Register of Historic Places for this rare and unique building, the development criteria specific to the building will be stringent in how the refurbishment is conducted and the process and materials used. The added pavilion and restroom facility will be constructed in a manner that differentiated from but aligned with the historic architectural style of the existing structure. The parking lot will be designed to meet the landscape and buffering requirements in the Development Code as well as the required amount of parking for the proposed use.

Outdoor mechanical equipment and service areas such as the dumpster will be screened from view using landscape plantings and a refuse enclosure. All light fixtures will be appropriately shielded to prevent light trespassing to adjacent properties to the maximum extent feasible.

Staff Response: It is the staff's expert opinion that this criterion has been met to the maximum extent practical because the site was designed to locate the new structure (restroom and picnic pavilion) and parking lot on the south-end of the property, closer to the more intensified Zone Districts of Multi-Family. Efforts have been made to shield the neighbors from lighting, and screen where appropriate. Mature landscaping will be preserved, and new landscaping will be installed to enhance the look, feel, and buffering of the site. The County Engineer did not have concerns for drainage, and a Traffic Impact Analysis was not required. The neighborhood is mostly zoned residential, but existing conditions integrate similar-scaled institutional uses to the north.

- g. Provisions shall be made to serve the development with tot lots and/or neighborhood parks in accordance with the Comprehensive Plan. A fee may be paid as approved by County Council to accomplish the purpose of the Comprehensive Plan in lieu of the development of tot lots or neighborhood parks.

Applicant Response: Not applicable.

Staff Response: Not applicable.

DRAFT MOTION

Motion Option 1:

I move to **approve** Case No. SIT-2025-0071, a request for Site Plan Approval to renovate the Manhattan Project Era Dormitory Building, an existing 2-story building previously noticed as the “Women’s Dorm Building”, to serve as a visitor center with historical and educational exhibits, related office space, and a Caretaker Unit; and construction of a 560 Sq. Ft. detached restroom facility with picnic pavilion. The property, EA3 U, is addressed 1725 17th Street and is within the Institutional (INS) zone district.

Approval is based on the Findings of Fact established at the hearing and the conclusion that the Applicant has met the decision criteria for Site Plan Adoption within Section 16-74(i)(4) of the Los Alamos County Development Code and that the Commission is acting under the authority granted by Section 16-69-(b)(2) of the Development Code.

I further move to authorize the Chair to sign a Final Order approving the application and Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law for this case, based on this decision to be prepared by county staff.

Motion Option 2:

I move to **deny** Case No. SIT-2024-0069, a request for Site Plan approval to renovate the Manhattan Project Era Dormitory Building, an existing 2-story building previously noticed as the “Women’s Dorm Building”, to serve as a visitor center with historical and educational exhibits, related office space, and a Caretaker Unit; and construction of a 560 Sq. Ft. detached restroom facility with picnic pavilion. The property, EA3 U, is addressed 1725 17th Street and is within the Institutional (INS) zone district.

Denial is based on the Applicant failing to demonstrate that the application meets the Site Plan adoption decision criteria within Section 16-74(i)(4) of the Los Alamos County Development Code, and that the Commission is acting under the authority granted by Section 16-69(b)(2) of the Development Code.

I further move to authorize the Chair to sign a Final Order approving the application and Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law for this case, based on this decision to be prepared by county staff.

EXHIBITS:

A – Comprehensive Plan: <https://lacnm.com/ComprehensivePlan2016>

B – Los Alamos County, Chapter 16, Development Code: <https://lacnm.com/MunicipalCode>