
Alice Bemis Taylor Center for Early Education

Project Statement

January 10th, 2025

Revised: March 12th, 2025

Request

RTA Architects on behalf of Early Connections Learning Centers requests approval of the following applications:

1. A Form-Based Code Minor Improvement Plan for a 2-story early childhood education center
2. Warrant to allow front yard fencing of a common lawn frontage type

Project Description

Existing Conditions

The site consists of a single lot located at the corner of Sahwatch Street and Costilla Street, adjacent to an existing bank property. The 17,000-square-foot building currently houses the Colorado Springs Conservatory, a multidisciplinary arts education organization. However, the building's layout is not well-suited to accommodate an early education center, and the site lacks the essential outdoor amenities and facilities to support such use.

The property is primarily composed of irrigated turf grass, with a gravel band encircling the building. An asphalt parking lot occupies the western half of the site, providing 36 parking spaces. The asphalt is in fair condition. Two raised planting areas, situated to the north and south of the building, contain mature deciduous and conifer trees and are elevated 1 to 2 feet above the general site grade. The entire property slopes upward by several feet from west to east.

Originally constructed in 1986 as the public defender's office, the building features angular modern architectural forms, highlighted by large, darkly tinted corner windows offering views to the west. The façade is clad in red utility brick laid in a running bond pattern, complemented by a 4-foot band of soldier-course brick at the top.

To the west of the parking lot, a strip of turf grass separates the asphalt from Sahwatch Street. This area includes a row of mature trees and parking meters for parallel street parking spaces. Notably, there is no sidewalk along Sahwatch Street.

On the north side of the site, a well-maintained sidewalk runs along Costilla Street, bordered by turf grass on both sides. This section features non-metered parallel parking and a designated bicycle lane. Recent upgrades to the intersection of Sahwatch and Costilla include curb extensions to enhance pedestrian safety and ensure ADA accessibility.

The east side of the building is set back from the property line 10 feet to accommodate a public utility easement. The grade slopes up in this area to a Wells Fargo bank property beyond.

A public alley runs along the south side of the site with overhead power lines and provides access to the dumpster area designated at the south east corner of the site.

Proposed Development

The project proposes the renovation of the existing arts education center to accommodate a new early education center, operated by Early Connections Learning Centers. The interior layout of the existing building will be significantly modified to accommodate administration offices, two infant care rooms and three toddler classrooms on the main floor. The second level will house 5 preschool classrooms. The basement will house professional development spaces, employee amenities, storage and other spaces required to house building systems.

While much of the exterior of the building will remain as is, alcoves in the exterior facade on the east side will be infilled and clad with a prefinished metal panel to provide more continuous interior space on the ground and second levels. An interior mezzanine floor that is currently not an ADA accessible space will be removed to provide a continuous accessible floor plate at the 2nd level. The existing roofing is to be replaced along with the top of wall coping. A canopy structure is to be constructed to protect the main entrance from the elements and to provide a more recognizable entry point. Colorful applied graphics and signage applied to the existing building will lend a playful identity to the otherwise formal and serious appearance of the existing building.

Parking lines are to be redrawn after the repair of the asphalt lot incorporating two accessible spots and 25 standard parking stalls. A portion of the parking lot will be repurposed to expand the playground space at the south west corner of the site. As the building lies within the Central Sector, there are no minimum parking requirements to be adhered to (FBZ Section 2.2.3).

Fenced playgrounds are required for an early education center and will occupy the existing landscaped areas on the north and south sides of the building. Site renovations will replace the existing mulch, gravel and turf grass with areas of artificial playground turf, rock mulch, engineered wood fiber and poured-in-place rubber which have been selected as appropriate and safe surfacing for the outdoor play areas. All but one tree will remain where the playground areas will occupy the site. The play areas will be designed to incorporate these existing mature trees to both provide necessary shade and allow students to interact with them. This “natural play” concept has also informed playground equipment and amenity selection to provide further immerse students and promote an exploratory outdoor experience.

Two sheds are to be constructed on the north and south sides of the building to provide secured storage for toys and play equipment. Like other exterior improvements, these sheds are to be finished in bright colors to further support the playful identity of the newly renovated building and a lively scene for passersby to take in. When compared to the 31’ tall building, the sheds will lower the scale of the environment to create a more comfortable outdoor experience for small children.

A 5-foot-tall fence is proposed around all outdoor play areas, featuring four locking egress gates strategically placed around the perimeter. To ensure maximum durability, visual coherence, and minimal impact on the surrounding environment, a prefinished black aluminum fencing material has been selected. This choice also preserves sightlines across the property. However, the proposed fencing along Costilla Street does not comply with the FBZ standard for a Common Lawn Frontage Type (FBZ Section 2.4.1), and we are requesting a warrant for this specific area. The introduction of outdoor play spaces will significantly enhance the site's vibrancy and is crucial for ensuring the safety and security of the children. While the fence adds a slightly urban edge to the Costilla sidewalk, aligning in some respects with the objectives of the central FBZ, the overall design incorporates numerous other features that prioritize a more pedestrian-friendly atmosphere.

This design capitalizes on the presence of mature trees, which are integrated not only within the playgrounds but also along the site's perimeter, enriching the pedestrian experience and providing valuable shade. The landscape strategy includes a diverse selection of perennials, ornamental grasses, and evergreen shrubs along the new playground fence line, effectively softening its edge. Meanwhile, existing lawn areas are preserved within the amenity zone. These thoughtful elements, combined with the joyful sounds of children at play, create an engaging and pleasant experience for pedestrians and contribute to the Downtown Colorado Springs area as an exemplary model of civic and environmental design.



The existing entry bridge is to be reconstructed and enhanced with a canopy structure



Existing alcoves on the east side of the building are to be infilled to increase usable interior area



Existing trees will provide shade for outdoor play areas and will allow students to “explore” a natural play area



Much of the existing turf grass, gravel and mulch is to be replaced with landscaping materials appropriate for outdoor play areas

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