

May 15, 2025

Environmental Planning Commission
City of Albuquerque
600 2nd St NW, Albuquerque, NM 87102

RE: RioGAFA, 1700 Unser Blvd – EPC Site Plan Major Amendment

Dear Planning Commission Members,

Dekker, as the agent for Rio Grande Academy of Fine Arts (RioGAFA), is seeking EPC approval to repeal the property located at 1700 Unser Blvd from the approved Heritage Marketplace Site Plan for Subdivision and its associated design standards.

Location:

The vacant subject site is located at 1700 Unser Blvd (UPC# 100905952600140105) is approximately 9 acres. The property is located next to major crossroads of Unser Blvd and Ladera Dr with Market St NW located on the east property line and Hanover Rd on the NW property line.

Zoning:

The subject site is zoned MX-L, Mixed-use Low Intensity Zone District and not within any overlay zones.



Comprehensive Plan Designations:

The subject property is located in the West Mesa Community Planning Area (CPA) and within an Area of Consistency.

Surrounding Area:

The subject property is currently within the Heritage Marketplace Site Plan for Subdivision which consists of commercial uses such as retail, restaurant, medical office, and personal services. The chart below depicts applicable zoning districts and uses surrounding the property.

Direction	North	South	East	West
Zone	MX-L	R-1B	PD	R-1B
Use	Commercial	Single-family	Apartments	Single-family

Request:

This request for a Major Amendment to an approved EPC Site Plan in order to repeal the subject property from the approved Heritage Marketplace Site Plan for Subdivision and its associated design standards. The Heritage Marketplace Site Plan for Subdivision has been amended several times over the years to accommodate new tenants. Most recently, the Site Plan for Subdivision was amended in 2014 to accommodate a multi-family development on the subject property, which never came to fruition. The current developer is seeking to build a charter school on the subject site. In addition, the applicant team anticipates a future Site Plan – DFT to entitle the school.

The Heritage Marketplace Site Plan for Subdivision never anticipated school use, and the design standards heavily restrict the exterior material choices which are tailored for commercial uses to create a shopping center with a consistent “look” with color, roofing, building façade materials, and sign requirements. The applicant is requesting to repeal themselves from the Heritage Marketplace Site Plan for Subdivision to provide more flexibility in creating a school campus that will still be informed by the surrounding land uses but not be required to mimic a commercial storefront in its choice of exterior finishes.

Approval of this request complies with the criteria of IDO 6-6(l)(3) Review and Decision Criteria for a Site Plan - EPC approval of the IDO as outlined below.

6-6(l)(3)(a) The Site Plan is consistent with the ABC Comp Plan, as amended.

Applicant Response: The RioGAFA – EPC Site Plan Major Amendment to repeal from the Heritage Marketplace Site Plan for Subdivision is consistent with the ABC Comp Plan, furthering the outlined goals and policies as follows:

G 5.3 Efficient Development Patterns: *Promote development patterns that maximize the utility of existing infrastructure and public facilities and the efficient use of land to support the public good.*

Applicant Response: The subject site is surrounded by existing development with existing infrastructure and public facilities. The site is fronted on three sides by established multifamily and single-family residential neighborhoods, whose residents

would benefit from having a school within walking or biking distance. This proximity promotes alternative transportation, reduces commute times for school pick up and drop off, and encourages community integration. Additionally, the charter school's phased programming—beginning with pre-kindergarten and elementary levels and expanding through high school—offers long-term continuity for families, reducing the need for students to attend multiple campuses across the city.

Schools are key components of complete communities, serving not only as educational institutions but also as neighborhood anchors that foster social connection, civic engagement, and a sense of identity. The presence of a school in close proximity enhances livability, supports intergenerational interaction, and contributes to the long-term resilience and cohesion of the surrounding community.

P 5.3.1 Infill Development: *Support additional growth in areas with existing infrastructure and public facilities.*

Applicant Response: This project represents a strategic infill development within a mixed-use area that includes both residential and commercial uses. Despite past failed development efforts, this site remains ideal due to its location and existing infrastructure. The applicant seeks to introduce a community-serving use that aligns with adopted policies geared at creating complete communities on an infill site supported by existing infrastructure.

G 5.4 Jobs-Housing Balance: *Balance jobs and housing by encouraging residential growth near employment across the region and prioritizing job growth west of the Rio Grande.*

Applicant Response: This charter school will create local employment opportunities for educators and support staff on the West Side of the Rio Grande. With nearby residential development, both students and staff will benefit from reduced commute times, enhancing quality of life and reinforcing the job-housing balance. In addition to creating jobs, the school provides a critical educational service in a growing area that has long faced limited access to diverse educational options. By offering an alternative, high-quality educational choice close to where families live, the project helps reduce the need for students to commute across the city for schooling. Locating a school within the neighborhood not only promotes sustainable development but also strengthens the educational infrastructure on the West Side to better meet current and future community needs.

P 5.4.2 West Side Jobs: *Foster employment opportunities on the West Side.*

Applicant Response: The abundance of housing on the West Side positions this school to draw from a local workforce. Staff recruitment will emphasize hiring locally, which not only reduces transportation impacts but also fosters deeper community investment and engagement by educators and support personnel.

G 5.6 City Development Areas: *Encourage and direct growth to Areas of Change where it is expected and desired and ensure that development in and near Areas of Consistency reinforces the character and intensity of the surrounding area.*

Applicant Response: The subject site lies within an Area of Consistency characterized by surrounding low-intensity residential uses. The proposed school complements the existing neighborhood fabric, reinforcing community character by introducing a public-serving, low-intensity use. Schools naturally integrate with residential areas, offering open space and a lower visual impact than commercial alternatives. Importantly, a school is a permissive use under the site's underlying MX-L zoning, which aligns with the regulatory intent for development in Areas of Consistency to reflect and reinforce the character, scale, and intensity of the surrounding area. This proposal preserves neighborhood scale, supports the area's residential identity, and enhances access to educational opportunities for local families.

P 5.6.3 Areas of Consistency: *Protect and enhance the character of existing single-family neighborhoods, areas outside of Centers and Corridors, parks, and Major Public Open Space.*

- b) Ensure that development reinforces the scale, intensity, and setbacks of the immediately surrounding context.

Applicant Response: The development of a charter school would soften the visual impact to the east and south residential neighborhoods from the commercial developments, which include a fast-food restaurant with drive-thru and a large retail shopping center. The school will also buffer the neighborhoods from Unser Blvd, a principal arterial road.

G 7.3 Sense of Place: *Reinforce sense of place through context-sensitive design of development and streetscapes.*

Applicant Response: Repealing the subject property from the Heritage Marketplace Site Plan for Subdivision will allow future development to follow the applicable standards of the MX-L zone district, the Integrated Development Ordinance (IDO), and the Development Process Manual (DPM), a framework better aligned with current planning goals and the intended use of the site. The existing Heritage Marketplace design standards, while appropriate for commercial development, impose constraints that conflict with the functional and contextual needs of a school campus. These include overly restrictive limitations on building materials, colors, fencing types, and roof design.

In contrast, the proposed charter school seeks to incorporate design elements that foster a strong sense of place for the surrounding community, particularly the intended student population and their families. This includes the use of school colors to build identity and school pride, deliberate design choices for exterior facades to reinforce the school identity, and landscape and green spaces that provide shade and visual interest. These elements are not only practical but are also consistent with the IDO's intent to allow context-sensitive design while ensuring public safety and efficient development.

Moreover, the applicant has proactively initiated outreach efforts, offering to meet with the impacted Neighborhood Associations identified by the Office of Neighborhood Coordination (ONC). The applicant is committed to discussing design concepts and gathering community feedback in advance of submitting any Development Facilitation Team (DFT) site plan to the City. This collaborative approach reflects a commitment to inclusive planning and reinforces a locally grounded sense of place that reflects community identity, supports educational success, and enhances neighborhood cohesion.

P 7.3.2 Community Character: *Encourage design strategies that recognize and embrace the character differences that give communities their distinct identities and make them safe and attractive places.*

Applicant Response: The Heritage Marketplace design standards are catered toward commercial development, specifically for a shopping center. This has worked well to create a cohesive retail node in the area. The proposed school should have an identity that is complementary, but not the same as a shopping center. The MX-L zone requires design strategies that are responsive to the surrounding context and neighborhoods. The community as a whole will have a better outcome and more distinct identity if the school follows the MX-L design standards rather than the more commercial-oriented standards of the Heritage Marketplace.

P 7.3.3 Placemaking: Encourage efforts to establish and strengthen district identity within Centers, business districts, and neighborhoods.

- a) *Identify, celebrate, and leverage special places.*
- c) *Develop distinctive signage, banners, and logos to use on businesses, in parks, near gateways and entrances, and on plazas.*
- e) *Encourage site design that includes gathering spaces for festivals, markets, and events.*

Applicant Response: Repealing the Heritage Marketplace design standards will allow the charter school to embrace placemaking principles aligned with its educational mission and community focus. The design will include distinctive school signage, community gathering spaces, and features that promote school pride and neighborhood cohesion. Events, festivals, and celebrations hosted on campus will help establish the school as a cherished community anchor and a special place for families in the area.

6-6(l)(3)(b) The Site Plan is consistent with any applicable terms and conditions in any previously approved NR-SU or PD zoning covering the subject property and any related development agreements and/or regulations.

Applicant Response: The request seeks to remove the subject site from the previously approved Site Plan for Subdivision. Upon repeal, the site will comply with the standards and regulations of the underlying zone district as established by the IDO. No terms or conditions from prior NR-SU or PD approvals will remain applicable to the subject property following this repeal.

6-6(l)(3)(c) The Site Plan complies with all applicable provisions of this IDO, the DPM, other adopted City regulations, and any terms and conditions specifically applied to development of the property in a prior permit or approval affecting the property.

Applicant Response: Any future Site Plans for the subject property will be required to comply with all applicable provisions of the IDO, the DPM, and other relevant City regulations. No prior conditions of approval will remain in effect following the repeal of the existing Site Plan for Subdivision.

6-6(l)(3)(d) The City's existing infrastructure and public improvements, including but not limited to its street, trail, drainage, and sidewalk systems, have adequate capacity to serve the proposed development, and any burdens on those systems have been mitigated to the maximum extent practicable.

Applicant Response: The applicant is actively working to obtain all required pre-approvals from relevant City departments to ensure that the proposed future school use on the site can be adequately supported by existing infrastructure systems, including streets, sidewalks, drainage, and other public improvements. Any deficiencies in infrastructure, such as areas where sidewalks are currently non-existent, will be addressed and improved as part of a future Site Plan-DFT process. All necessary infrastructure will be provided in accordance with applicable IDO and DPM standards to ensure adequate service and connectivity.

6-6(l)(3)(e) The application mitigates any significant adverse impacts on the project site and the surrounding area to the maximum extent practicable.

Applicant Response: This request to repeal the existing Site Plan for Subdivision does not propose any physical development at this time. However, the applicant is committed to ensuring that any future development will be subject to Site Plan – DFT review and will fully comply with all applicable City regulations, including those related to traffic, drainage, infrastructure, and buffering.

To proactively address potential concerns, the applicant has initiated outreach to the applicable neighborhood associations and offered to meet and discuss the proposed school use—exceeding the engagement requirements of the IDO. This early and voluntary engagement demonstrates a commitment to transparency and collaboration. The applicant will continue working closely with adjacent neighbors and stakeholders throughout the approval process to ensure that any impacts are thoughtfully considered and mitigated to the maximum extent practicable.

6-6(l)(3)(f) If the subject property is within an approved Master Development Plan, the Site Plan meets any relevant standards in the Master Development Plan in addition to any standards applicable in the zone district the subject property is in.

Applicant Response: The subject property is not located within the boundaries of an approved Master Development Plan. Therefore, this criterion does not apply. Any future development on the site will comply with all applicable standards of the underlying zone district and the Integrated Development Ordinance (IDO).

6-6(l)(3)(g) If a cumulative impact analysis is required in the Railroad and Spur Small Area pursuant to Subsections 14-16-5-2(E) (Cumulative Impacts) and 14-16-6-4(H) (Cumulative Impacts Analysis Requirements), the Site Plan incorporates mitigation for all identified cumulative impacts. The proposed development will not create material adverse impacts on water quality or other land in the surrounding area through increases in traffic congestion, parking congestion, noise, vibration, light spillover, or other nuisances without sufficient mitigation or civic or environmental benefits that outweigh the expected impacts.

Applicant Response: The subject property is not within a Railroad and Spur Small Area therefore a cumulative impact analysis is not required.

Engagement:

The project team provided adjacent Neighborhood Associations within 660', as provided by the ONC, notice to meet ahead of application submittal to gather public input. Any requests for meetings, sign-in sheets, and facilities meetings will be provided to Planning Staff for review and documentation.

Conclusion:

Based upon the rationale presented in this letter, we respectfully request approval of this Site Plan Major Amendment – EPC to repeal 1700 Unser Blvd from the Heritage Marketplace Site Plan for Subdivision. If you have any questions or need clarification of anything contained herein, please contact me at willg@dekkerdesign.org or at (505) 761-9700.

Sincerely,



Will Gleason, AICP
Principal, Dekker
Agent for RioGAFA