



Project Address: 4301 Cherokee Drive
Application Type: Public Building for MMSD Cherokee Middle School
UDC is an Approving Body
Legistar File ID #: [92524](#)
Prepared By: Jessica Vaughn, AICP, UDC Secretary

Background Information

Applicant | Contact: Scott Chehak, Madison Metropolitan School District | Susan Bowersox, OPN Architects

Project Description: The applicant is proposing the construction of a new roughly 183,000 square foot, two-story school on the unused (western) portion of the property while the existing school remains open. Upon completion of the new construction the exiting building will be demolished and replaced with parking and green space.

Project Schedule:

- UDC received an Informational Presentation on April 15, 2026.
- The Plan Commission is scheduled to review this proposal at their July 27, 2026, meeting.

Approval Standards: The UDC is an **approving body** on this request. Pursuant to MGO Section 33.24(4)(d), "*The UDC shall approve plans for all buildings proposed to be built or expanded in the City by the State of Wisconsin, the University of Wisconsin, the City of Madison, Dane County, the Federal Government or any other local governmental entity which has the power to levy taxes on property located within the City.*"

Staff note that the UDC's approving authority is limited to the buildings themselves; any comments related to landscaping would only be advisory in nature.

Summary of Design Considerations

Staff request the UDC provide feedback and findings as required for public buildings. Potential design considerations for the Commission's review and comment are identified below:

- **Building Design and Materials**, including as it relates to using durable, high-quality materials, as well as employing architectural design and detailing to breakdown the overall mass and scale of the proposed building, creating a visual finish or termination at the top of the building, clearly defining or accentuating building entrances and creating ground level orientation and visual interest towards the street, minimizing/mitigating blank wall expanses, especially those that are street facing (west elevation), and maintaining the same level of design and detailing across all elevations.

In summary, and generally, as noted by the Commission in their Informational Presentation comments, the proposed design has something fresh and subtle about the colors, but the Commission expressed concern for the amount of blank walls and that ways to break them down or minimize their appearance with landscaping, fenestration, etc. should continue to be explored.

As reflected on the landscape plan, there is a landscape screen proposed along the S Midvale Boulevard facing, west elevation, including a variety of deciduous overstory trees and shrubs.

Staff also note that while a materials board was provided and material labels are included on the elevation drawings and depicted on the renderings, specific details related to some of the materials have not been outlined, including color and texture, manufacturer, etc. Staff recommend the UDC address final materials/details as part of their action.

Staff request the request the Commission's feedback and findings on the overall building design and materials.

- **Signage.** Staff note and the applicant is advised that while signage is shown on the elevation drawings, signage is not part of this review. As shown, the proposed wall sign **does not** comply with the Sign Code and would require special approval. A separate review and approval are required for all signage. Staff encourage the applicant team to work with Zoning Staff early in the process to confirm that any proposed signage complies with the [Sign Code](#).

Summary of Informational Presentation Discussion & Questions

As a reference, a summary of the Commission's comments and discussion from the April 15, 2026, Informational Presentation are provided below:

The Commission asked about the three sloped roof areas on the west elevation; those are clerestories over the corridor in the middle of the building for natural light.

The Commission acknowledged the importance of preserving the chimney piece and the heritage oak.

The Commission inquired how the color palette and architecture were chosen. The applicant noted that while design decisions are not final, they did look at the context of the neighborhood, and the history of the site and school. They studied color that relates to more of the natural elements of the site at this particular location, and the experience of how you perceive the building as you travel down Midvale Boulevard. They tried to break down the scale of a long building without being too busy. The design is less about a specific style of architecture than how can we blend in a building of this size on this site without it feeling like a foreign object.

The Commission noted the existing school has some pretty interesting blue metal panels which stand out. This has something fresh and subtle about the colors.

The Commission liked the indoor/outdoor relationship. There is a lot of bioretention on the site, exploring different ways with a bridge or boardwalk crossing through them. The applicant replied that the school district may not be in support of a bridge element, these are explorations of how to tie things together. There is an elevation or just the perception of an elevated walkway experience that will be surrounded by native plantings.

The Commission remarked that the site feels scattered, with no real outdoor recess experience, and there doesn't seem to be one open space that's the main collector of students.

The Commission commented there is an inadequate amount of basketball court which is disconnected from the playground, which is disconnected to the soccer field, which is disconnected to the amphitheater – seems like there is not a go-to spot. The basketball court is not large enough, and it is heavily used, is that driven by the hinge point in the building? Would shifting or reorienting the building on the site, removing the hinge result in better site programming and layout? Noise from Midvale isn't mitigated at all from the kink. Shifting or reorienting the building might make sense. The applicant replied that they have been having

the same discussions, looking at how to make the site amenities work and connect; changes will be apparent in future design iterations.

The Commission noted the impacts to the sledding hill and taking that into consideration. The intent is to provide a safe sledding environment next to the school.

The Commission noted the building masses being nestled into the hill, but there is a large amount of blank walls, noting the design is still in progress. Look at ways to break that down with landscaping, fenestration, etc.

The Commission commented on the location of the trash enclosure off the corner of the parking lot as perhaps not the best location.

The Commission noted that the site plan dashed lines is a strongly desired path for students coming from Midvale and Cherokee; they will create that path if you don't provide it.