

Urban Design Review Panel Comments

Date	January 21, 2026	
Time	3:00	
Panel Members	Present Boris Karn (chair) Kaz Bremner Andrea Kennedy Bao-Nghi Nhan Brendan Stevenson Taylor Stollbert	Distribution Katherine Robinson (chair) Chris Andrew Sara deKorte Rick Gendron Ben Klumper Ryan Martinson
Advisor	Peter Spearey, Chief Urban Designer	
Application number	DP2025-06909	
Municipal address	8500, 8710 40 St NE	
Community	Saddle Ridge Industrial	
Project description	New: outdoor recreation area, indoor recreation facility	
Review	First	
File Manager	Rick Michalenko for Felix Ochieng	
Urban Design	Hardy Huang	
Applicant	GEC Architecture	

*Based on the applicant's response to the Panel's comments, the Chief Urban Designer will determine if further review will include the Panel or be completed internally only by Urban Design.

SUMMARY

Much of the Panel's feedback was discussed with the applicant during the review session. The following written comments are intended to complement that discussion by capturing key points of consensus and offering additional suggestions to support ongoing design development. The Panel recognizes the significance of this facility within Calgary's civic and recreational landscape and provides the comments below to help strengthen the project's urban design performance, public realm integration, and long-term community value.

The Panel commends the Applicant for a clear and comprehensive presentation that effectively communicates the design intent and programmatic complexity of the Northeast Athletic Complex (NEAC). The project demonstrates a strong architectural and landscape vision that thoughtfully addresses a demanding multi - sport program through a coherent site structure, a public plaza that serves as a civic commons that will function well for events and large groups, as well as a building concept that integrates large program volumes with human-scaled experiences. There are compelling human narratives that this project supports. The Panel encourages the description of the conceptual narrative through the human stories of the people and the communities this project serves.

Additionally, the Panel commends the Applicant team for its ambition to position the facility as a year - round civic gathering place and identifies several elements that work particularly well, including: the layered spectator berm, the relationship between the plaza and fieldhouse, and the canopy as a defining 'moment' that creates a unique and memorable identify for the facility. At the same time, opportunities exist to strengthen connections to adjacent community assets / destinations, enhance pedestrian comfort and permeability, refine play areas and plaza programming to support daily life, and further clarify how resilience and climate adaptability will be expressed through the building and landscape.

Urban Design Element	
Place Recognize and enhance the unique and emerging identity of a place by responding to surrounding context, local policy, and community objectives through the contribution of innovative architecture and public realm.	
Site	Does the site planning show innovation in addressing site constraints and challenges?
	Does the design respect existing topography, landscape, and archaeology?
	Does the site design accommodate people of all abilities?
Architecture	Is the project visually interesting and unique?
	Does the architecture respond to landmark and gateway opportunities presented by the site?
	Does the design reflect any distinctive social, cultural or historical aspects of the site and community?
Public Realm	Does the project contribute to the creation of a high quality, connected public realm?
UDRP Commentary	<p>The Panel appreciates the clear intent to establish NEAC as more than just a sports complex, but as a community hub and civic gathering destination that reflects the cultural diversity of users and supports cricket and soccer as social as well as athletic activities. The central plaza, the integration of structured and unstructured play areas, and the layered spectator berm for the feature cricket field all contribute to a strong sense of place and a memorable visitor experience.</p> <p>At the same time, the site's context diagrams identify opportunities to engage with adjacent amenities, activity zones, and nearby residential and commercial areas that are not yet fully realized in the design. There are key opportunities along the north edge, where future smaller-scale commercial uses will emerge, and at the interface with the existing park and storm pond to the south. The Panel encourages the team to more deliberately and strategically respond to these adjacencies – for example through clearer pedestrian connections, views, and programmatic synergies that reinforce NEAC as a daily public commons rather than an isolated destination.</p> <p>There is a playful use of colour in the landscape reference imagery. There is opportunity to integrate this into primary interior public spaces to present consistent design elements throughout the facility.</p>
Applicant Response	<p>The north edge of the NEAC site is intentionally fence-less to maximize permeability and allow flexible, future connections to the planned smaller-scale commercial development. Key amenities including covered picnic areas, outdoor fitness, structure play, and nature-based activity areas, are located nearby to support shared use and reinforce NEAC as an everyday public commons.</p> <p>The south storm pond interface is not City-owned, fenced, and characterized by steep grades and limited accessibility, creating an unsafe condition for formal public access. As a result, Recreation is not proposing a formal connection to the pond lands, and will instead maintain a safe, legible site edge on the NEAC side.</p> <p>The interior public spaces have been updated to reflect the site's playful design language, weaving the broader site colour palette into interior wayfinding and graphics, including wall graphics that celebrate activities at NEAC for a consistent experience throughout the facility.</p>
Scale Ensure appropriate transitions between building masses and adjacent places and spaces; define street and open space edges and bring human scale through articulation, materials, details and landscaping.	
Site	Does the arrangement of buildings and spaces on the site address street edges well?
	Is the scale and placement of buildings and structures appropriate for the street and public space size and type?

	Are large service and surface parking areas modulated and screened by structures and landscaping?
Architecture	Are design strategies employed to reduce the impact of building height and bulk?
	Are street walls well defined and of appropriate height to street width and type?
	Are human scaled elements and details included to enhance street character?
Public Realm	Are public spaces well edged and framed by structures and/or landscaping?
	Does the design include detail which will enhance street character and encourage use of the public realm?
UDRP Commentary	<p>The Panel acknowledges that the building massing is inherently large and encourages the design team to continue celebrating the facility's scale as a civic asset. The use of a durable brick base, articulated metal cladding, strategic glazing, and the prominent canopy effectively breaks down the overall bulk while establishing a recognizable civic frontage. The cricket berm and associated viewing terraces are particularly successful in introducing human scale and creating a layered, engaging spectator experience. The integrated architecture/landscape of this area is highly successful and could be explored – in a more modest way – for the turf pitches north of the fieldhouse. A lighting strategy that includes the berm canopy as an intentional design element would further highlight this as a unique architectural identity feature for the facility.</p> <p>Given NEAC's role as a major public facility with high expectations for design quality, the Panel sees opportunities to refine how scale is managed in relation to parking areas, plaza edges, and everyday pedestrian use. The large parking fields would benefit from stronger structuring elements - such as tree canopy, clear pedestrian "streets," and predictable crossing points - to avoid an overly vehicular character. Long building elevations, especially along primary approach routes, would benefit from careful detailing to create human scaled visual interest, prevent monotony and maintain a timeless quality. This includes reconsidering the materiality and/or colour of the articulated green metal cladding to ensure long-term durability and visual coherence.</p> <p>For the central plaza, the Panel encourages further refinement to ensure that its scale, amenities, and edge conditions support both its role as a major event space and as an everyday public commons. The open character of the plaza is appreciated, and additional articulation of the edges could allow for thoughtfully integrated seating, shade, small group spaces, and tree planting without diminishing the openness or compromising circulation.</p>
Applicant Response	<p>The landscaped areas around the north turf pitches extend the berm's integrated architecture/landscape approach through gentle mounding and targeted planting to create raised areas for informal viewing, play, and gathering.</p> <p>The berm canopy lighting is designed as even uplighting to provide ambient illumination and intentionally highlight the canopy as a signature identity element for the facility.</p> <p>To better balance scale and everyday pedestrian use, the parking areas now include additional, clearly defined pedestrian crossing zones, along with select added tree planting and benches to strengthen structure and comfort. Updates are shown on L-001.</p> <p>For the central plaza, edge conditions have been refined to support both event and daily use, incorporating trees, benches, formal seating, and flat/raised grassed areas, with the central canopy providing shade and a natural gathering point. A nearby structured playground adds another daily-use option adjacent to the plaza.</p>
<i>Amenity</i> Ensure that public sidewalks and gathering spaces are generously proportioned, comfortable, safe, fully accessible, and framed by permeable facades which allow for activation throughout the year.	
Site	Are equitable, inviting access and varied movement options provided for all ages and abilities?
	Does the design work with sun orientation and seasonal climate variation?

	Does the site plan safely accommodate all travel modes?
	Are service and utility requirements located appropriately to lessen visual impact?
Architecture	Does the building(s) meet or exceed expectations for universal access design?
	Does the architecture create a pleasant street edge which feels safe to users?
Public Realm	Does the public realm design prioritize pedestrians and cyclists over vehicle access?
	Is the public realm visually interesting, comfortable, and safe during all seasons?
	Are the public spaces designed for people of all abilities and ages?
	Do the public spaces meet or exceed expectations for universal access design?
UDRP Commentary	<p>Amenity is one of the project's clear strengths. The Panel commends the inclusive public- realm strategy that integrates multi- use paths, multiple structured and unstructured play areas, outdoor fitness zones, covered picnic shelters, and a generous central plaza with a strong relationship to the fieldhouse lobby. The interior spaces - including the lobby, indoor viewing platform, and multipurpose rooms - reinforce opportunities for casual gathering, team wind- ups, and small community events, contributing to a well-rounded recreational experience.</p> <p>A significant portion of the amenity offering is concentrated around the cricket pitch and fieldhouse, with strong indoor–outdoor relationships and well- considered spectator experiences. Elsewhere on the site, however, amenities are more dispersed and are primarily linked by the multi- use pathway rather than being directly integrated with the major program areas. The Panel encourages the applicant to explore opportunities to redistribute or strengthen connections among these smaller gathering nodes and play areas, providing clearer relationships to the facility and community.</p> <p>The north side of the fieldhouse presents a particular opportunity to enrich amenity and improve the relationship between indoor and outdoor space. The gathering area and unstructured play zone in this location would benefit greatly from a more direct interior– exterior connection, as well as a stronger link to the active public plaza. The Panel recommends exploring options such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introducing a secondary indoor amenity or view- oriented opening on the north façade; and/or • Articulating the northwest corner of the fieldhouse to strengthen the spatial connection with the plaza. <p>The Panel also acknowledges and supports the design team's efforts to activate the entire perimeter of the facility. Enhancing vibrancy along the east side of the turf fields - traditionally an inactive "back side" - is particularly appreciated. As an alternative or complement to the multi- use path in this area, the Panel suggests considering this zone as a training corridor for athletes, supporting warm- ups, sprinting, and field-adjacent conditioning activities.</p> <p>The Panel encourages continued refinement of the active public plaza with an emphasis on daily life and comfort. The open, uncluttered nature of the space is appreciated; however, the integration of shaded seating, group gathering pockets, accessible seating options, and subtle edge articulation would significantly enhance comfort without compromising the plaza's function for events. Opportunities for integrated art, shade structures, or team- photo backdrops could help establish the plaza as a memorable and versatile social commons.</p>
Applicant Response	<p>Activity "nodes" have been strategically distributed around the site to activate perimeter areas and support both passive and active use. Picnic, gathering, shade, fitness, and play elements are intentionally grouped near major program areas (e.g., the north fields) to strengthen relationships between amenities and primary activity zones while remaining connected by the multi-use pathway.</p> <p>A direct interior-exterior connection to the activity node immediately north of the fieldhouse was explored early; however, associated operational challenges, particularly the risk of dirt</p>

	<p>and debris impacting the indoor artificial turf, made this approach undesirable. An outdoor training corridor along the east side was also reviewed; based on Recreation's operational experience, this would likely create conflict over use, require additional booking/management, and risk shifting from an amenity to an operational issue. For these reasons, it was removed from the project's functional program.</p> <p>The central plaza supports both daily comfort and event flexibility by incorporating trees with natural shade, benches, formal seating, and flat/raised grassed areas, with a central canopy providing shade and a natural gathering point. A nearby structured playground further supports everyday use, and the project has submitted an application to be considered for public art installation to enhance identity and placemaking.</p>
<p>Legibility <i>Create logical, permeable networks of streets and pathways that connect within and between neighbourhoods and public places; design well-defined community and building entrances with distinctive, memorable attributes.</i></p>	
<p>Site</p>	<p>Does the project provide a permeable, fine-grained and functional urban structure of blocks and streets?</p> <p>Does the project provide legible, accessible, continuous walking and cycling connections within the site that connect to adjacent systems and destinations?</p> <p>Does the proposed network consider future expansion into surrounding areas?</p> <p>Are large parking areas designed with clear, safe, direct pedestrian connections?</p>
<p>Architecture</p>	<p>Are buildings designed with clearly marked and differentiated entries to facilitate wayfinding?</p>
<p>Public Realm</p>	<p>Are the public routes and spaces configured to facilitate easy and safe navigation with clear paths and appropriately placed wayfinding elements?</p>
<p>UDRP Commentary</p>	<p>The Panel finds that the overall site structure is logically organized, with a clear central plaza that anchors movement between the fieldhouse and the primary outdoor program areas. The main entry sequence, supported by the canopy, is well positioned to become a memorable and intuitive wayfinding element that contributes strongly to the facility's civic identity. Along Metis Trail, the project is beginning to establish a more active and visible frontage, which will help orient visitors arriving from the broader network.</p> <p>Several aspects of legibility and permeability would benefit from further refinement to ensure ease of navigation, safety, and a cohesive experience for daily users and event attendees alike. In particular, circulation patterns associated with the adjacent high - intensity retail uses must be carefully understood, as they have significant implications for vehicular and pedestrian movement to, through and around the site.</p> <p>To strengthen clarity, comfort, and the intuitive use of the site, the Panel recommends:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing the circulation impacts of the adjacent Costco, including queues, loading operations, overspill parking, intersection offsets, pedestrian desire line and crossings, and peak - time traffic behaviour. These conditions should be mitigated proactively to avoid conflicts and uncertainty for visitors. • Enhancing parking - area legibility by establishing clear internal routes, predictable crossing points, and visible, direct connections between parking areas and primary/secondary building entries. These routes should consider both large - event conditions and the typical everyday patterns of athletes carrying gear and moving between fields and the facility. • Clarifying the role of the multi - use pathway loop within the broader mobility network. The Panel recommends distinguishing whether it is intended as part of the citywide MUP system or as a recreational on - site loop. This determination will influence expected users (e.g. cyclists, pedestrians, training lanes) and inform appropriate widths, sightlines, and surface design.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthening entry points and visual cues along the north edge and west side to reduce the likelihood of isolated or underused “pinch - point” zones. These areas will become increasingly important as adjacent development to the north progresses. Ensuring wayfinding and signage reflect the same level of refinement seen in the canopy and architectural expression. Consistent, clearly placed visual cues will be essential for visitors navigating a complex program, particularly at tournaments and high- attendance events.
Applicant Response	<p>An updated Traffic Impact Assessment (TIA) has been completed to reflect the NEAC site plan and the immediately adjacent commercial context, including circulation considerations along the Metis Trail frontage. In response, the site plan has been refined to improve legibility and safety, including additional internal pedestrian crossings through the parking areas to establish clearer, more predictable routes between parking and the building/fields. These updates are shown on DP-003.</p> <p>To strengthen permeability and integration with the broader network and future development, a direct connection to the existing multi-use pathway along Metis Trail has been added at the southeast corner, and the north fenceline has been removed to support future connectivity to the adjacent north development.</p> <p>Wayfinding and signage are currently in early design, and will be developed to provide consistent, clearly placed cues for both daily users and large events, aligned with the facility’s architectural identity and the site’s design language.</p>
<p>Vibrancy <i>Ensure that new developments are configured and designed to animate streets and public spaces with varied sizes and types of grade-oriented uses.</i></p>	
Site	<p>Will the building placement and orientation together with the arrangement and variety of uses activate the adjacent streets and public spaces?</p> <p>Will the project contribute to creating greater economic, employment and/or residential diversity in the neighbourhood?</p>
Architecture	<p>Does the building articulation, materials and details contribute to the vibrancy of the streets and public spaces?</p> <p>Is there a variety of residential and/or commercial unit types and sizes?</p>
Public Realm	<p>Do outdoor spaces provide varied experiences and accommodate people with diverse abilities?</p>
UDRP Commentary	<p>The Panel is very encouraged by the programmatic mix and overall playfulness of the facility, which is well-suited to supporting both high-level sporting events and everyday community use. The combination of indoor fieldhouse, outdoor pitches, multipurpose rooms, spectator berms, play zones, and an active plaza is well-positioned to animate the site throughout the day and will encourage visitors to spend more time here. The project also supports greater cultural vibrancy, particularly by foregrounding cricket and soccer as key community sports for the area’s diverse population.</p> <p>To further enhance vibrancy, the Panel recommends:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designing the site to support year-round activation, including compatible winter uses (e.g., exploration of flooding a portion of the parking lot for seasonal skating, with the support of strategic grading and curbs). Consider how “warming” functions could be incorporated within the plaza and spectator berm spaces, and explore the potential for winter uses of the outdoor sports fields. Considering NEAC as a potential venue for arts and culture – for example, festival programming, performances, or cultural celebrations that can take advantage of the plaza and adjacent berms. This may benefit from a conversation with The City to explore adding this facility as a managed venue.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthening indoor–outdoor relationships (e.g., additional transparent edges or secondary lobby/entry moments) to allow activity inside to “spill out” and be visible from key public spaces. This appears to be a missed opportunity on the north side of the indoor fieldhouse, as it could engage more strongly with the activity zones, and better connect with the outdoor pitches. Strategic glazing should be considered along the north-east, east, and south building edges to increase natural surveillance of the site. <p>With these refinements, the project can strongly contribute to the vibrancy of Saddle Ridge Industrial and surrounding communities, well beyond scheduled game times.</p>
Applicant Response	<p>During winter months, year-round activation will be supported through continued public access to the multi-use pathway loop, play structures, and the indoor fieldhouse. The plaza is also being considered for arts and cultural programming; however, the south cricket field will remain dedicated to sport to protect long-term field performance and integrity.</p> <p>Indoor-outdoor relationships were explored throughout the design process. Strategic glazing was evaluated on all building elevations with careful consideration of budget and light trespass to adjacent playfields. Sun studies were completed to guide window placement and optimize visibility and natural surveillance while managing glare and spill, and these findings are reflected in the current design.</p>
<p>Resilience <i>Ensure that projects provide opportunities, through their site layout, spatial configuration, materials, and sustainable design features for responsible operation and continuous adaptation to change over time.</i></p>	
Site	Is the project designed to respond to change (economic, social, demographic or other) over time?
	Does the plan meet/exceed climate resilience/sustainable design expectations?
	Are active travel modes prioritized, and active lifestyle choices encouraged?
Architecture	Does the building show indication of sustainable design practices and materials?
	Is a range of uses accommodated; does the design anticipate future change?
	Is the building designed to endure over time with reasonable maintenance?
Public Realm	Are public spaces adaptable for multiple uses over short and medium term?
	Does the public realm design respond to climate resilience / sustainability expectations?
UDRP Commentary	<p>The Panel acknowledges that the applicant is working closely with The City of Calgary to establish clear, achievable resilience and sustainability targets that meet The City’s needs and requirements, in balance with budget expectations and alignment. There is a clear intent to embed resilience and sustainability into the project, including the potential for a LEED v4.1 Silver target, a roof-mounted PV array, EV-ready parking, and the designation of the facility as a cooling centre for the community. The combination of durable materials, adaptable building systems, and flexible site programming (such as half-court basketball line painting in the parking area for partial closures) demonstrates a thoughtful approach to long-term use and change over time.</p> <p>The Panel encourages the team to continue to push from “future-ready” to doing more now, particularly with respect to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarifying how the building envelope and mechanical systems will perform under 2050 climate scenarios, especially given the cooling centre role. Ensuring the public realm is robust and adaptable to multiple uses and seasonal conditions, while maintaining comfort and safety (shade, wind mitigation, snow management).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploring additional low-impact development (LID) and green infrastructure opportunities. • Enhanced landscaping, notably additional tree and shrub plantings to provide shade for cooling. <p>Overall, the project is on a solid path, and the Panel sees a strong opportunity for NEAC to showcase resilience as part of its civic identity and set a precedent for City facilities.</p>
Applicant Response	<p>NEAC is being designed with a robust, high-performing building envelope using the PERSIST system to support long-term durability, energy performance, and resilience. Low Impact Development (LID) strategies are incorporated throughout the site, and additional tree and shrub planting has been added in key areas to increase shade and support summer cooling in the public realm. Please refer to DP-010 and L-001.</p> <p>Mechanical spaces have also been planned to be future-ready for an air-source heat pump transition, including appropriate space allowances and access, to support the facility's long-term performance and the cooling-centre role. Please refer to DP-010.</p>