



Staff Report and Recommendations Agenda of April 13, 2026, Item 6a

County of Ventura • Resource Management Agency

800 S. Victoria Avenue, Ventura, CA 93009-1740 • (805) 654-2478 • rma.venturacounty.gov/divisions/planning/

I. APPLICANT/PROPERTY OWNER:

Applicant: Lisa Woodburn
Sanbell
1672 Donlon Street
Ventura, CA 93003

Property Owner: The Thacher School
Attn: Joel Kyle
5025 Thacher Road
Ojai, CA 93023

II. REQUEST:

A request for a Certificate of Appropriateness (Cultural Heritage Ordinance §1371) for the demolition of four existing historic tennis courts and their replacement with a new approximately 5,300-square-foot Health & Wellness Center at the north portion of the existing court area at The Thacher School, located at 5025 Thacher Road, Ojai, CA 93023. The proposed project also includes the development of a new landscaped open space at the south portion of the site to support passive recreational uses for students, the construction of new stairs and pathways connecting the improvement area to existing buildings and outdoor use areas in the vicinity, and one new van-accessible/ambulance parking space off the existing service road at the north end of the project area. The request includes review and comment by the Cultural Heritage Board on the proposed project in accordance with the County of Ventura Initial Study Assessment Guidelines, Section 13 (Historical Resources), Section 13.3.2 (Impact Analysis). (Case No. CH26-0018).

III. LOCATION AND PROPERTY INFORMATION:

5025 Thacher Road, Ojai, CA 93023 (unincorporated Ventura County)
Assessor's Parcel Numbers (APNs): 014-0-130-050, 029-0-031-040, 030-0-010-030,
and 014-0-110-120
Historic Designation: Ventura County Site of Merit; National Register Historic District
Common Name: The Thacher School

The Thacher School property consists of over 300 acres dedicated to the private education and boarding of students. Figure 1 depicts the location of the project site in the broader vicinity; Figure 2 provides a closer image of the school campus; and, Figure 3 identifies the location of the project site within the Historic District of the campus.

Figure 1 – Regional Vicinity

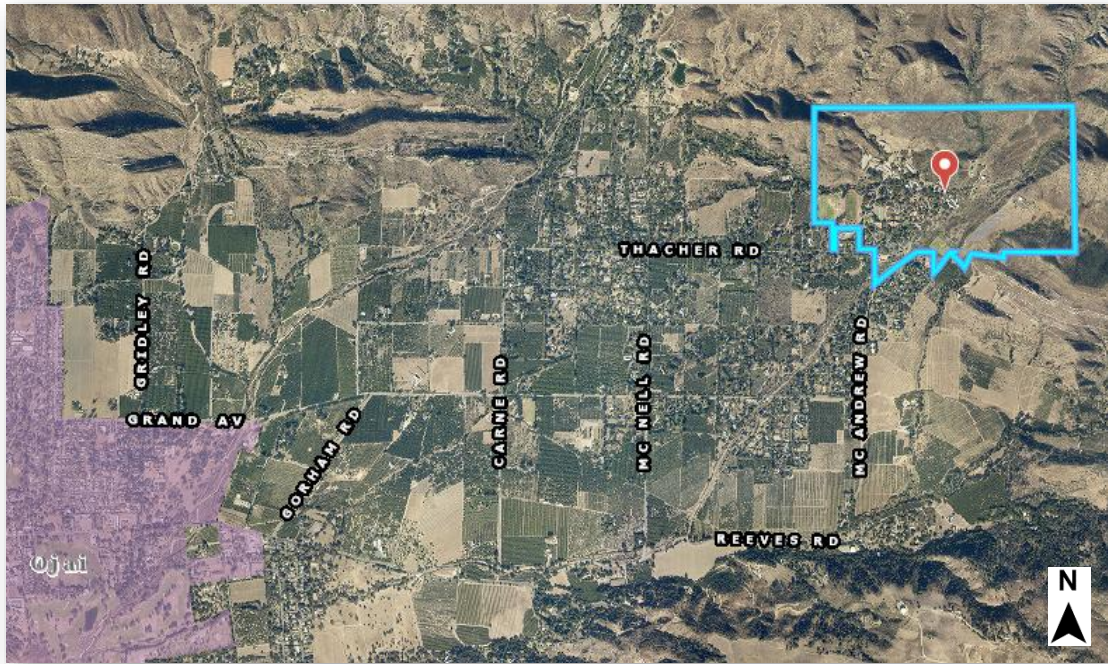


Figure 2 – Aerial View of Site

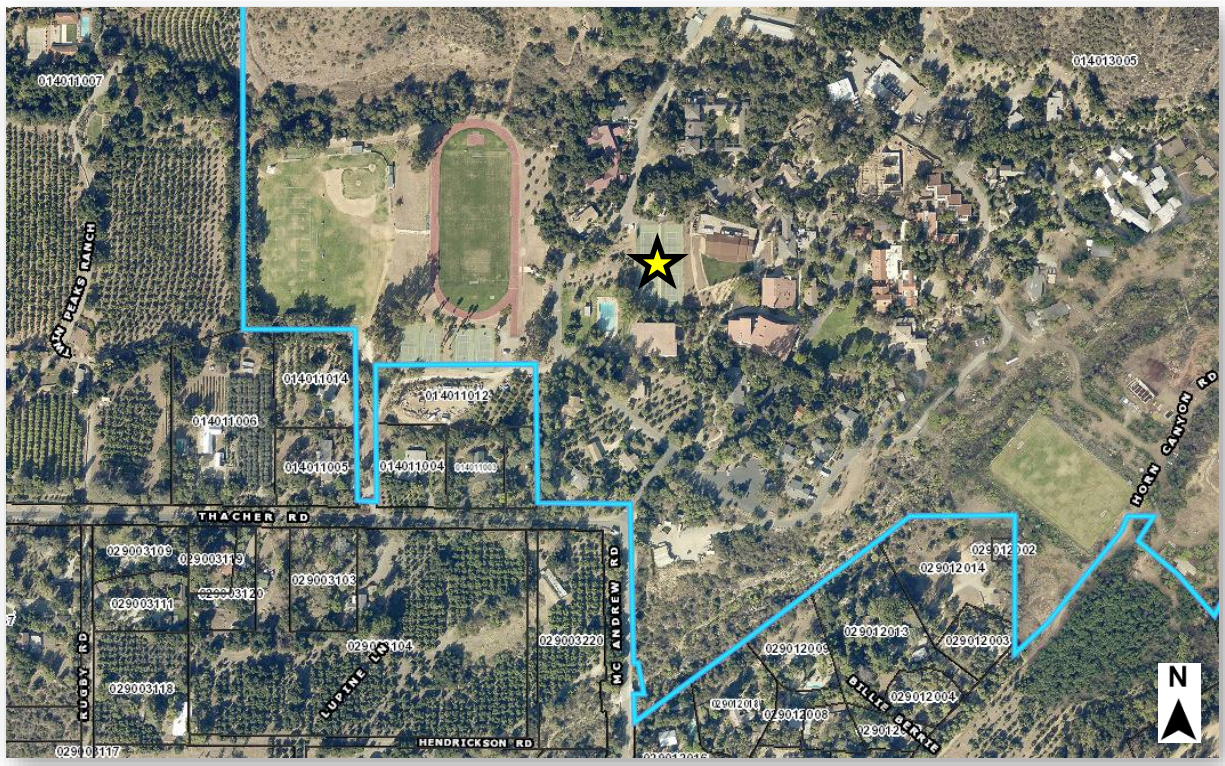
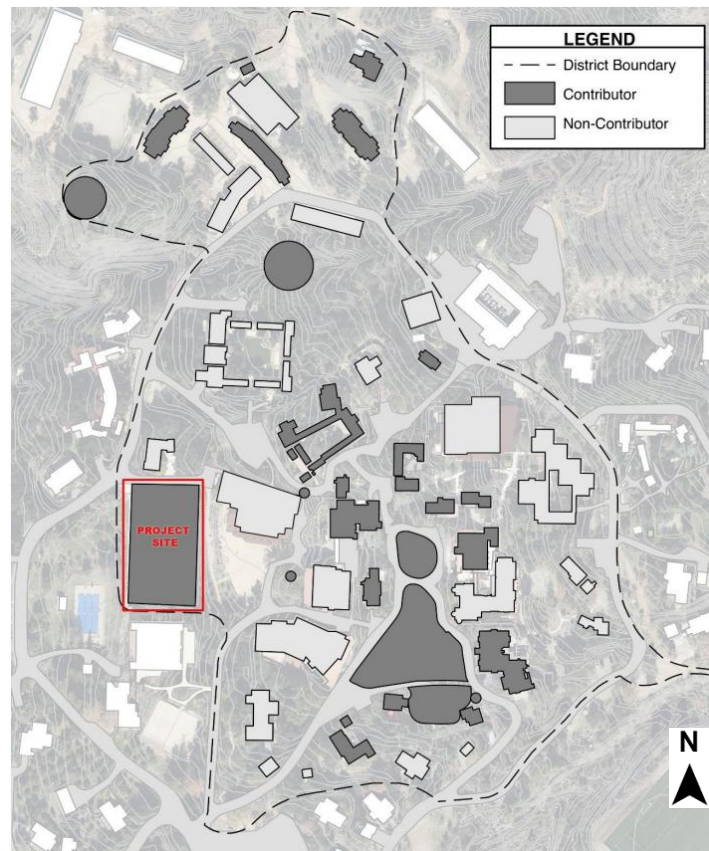


Figure 3 – Project Location within the Thacher School Historic District



Source: Historic Resources Group

IV. **PROJECT SCOPE:**

The Thacher School proposes to replace the existing 2,880-square-foot Health Center modular trailers (approved under Case Nos. PL18-0034 and PL20-0053) with a new, permanent 5,300-square-foot Health Center that will provide both physical and mental health services to students. The project requires demolition of four existing tennis courts to accommodate the new facility and includes construction of new accessible pathways that connect the Health Center to surrounding campus buildings and facilities.

The Health Center features high fire-resistant composite siding designed to resemble wood; a corrugated metal roof with matching metal fascia; bronze-anodized aluminum windows and doors; and bronze-anodized metal trim and cladding to coordinate with the fenestration. Additional elements include a Corten steel trellis; dry-stack stone walls made of medium- to light-toned, roughly squared sandstone ledgerstone; and galvanized sheet metal gutters and downspouts, finished to match the roof color (see Exhibit 1 – Proposed Plans and Elevations, Exhibit 2 – Existing Site Photos, and Exhibit 3 – Architectural Palette). Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the existing and proposed site plans, while Figures 6 and 7 show the proposed building elevations.

Figure 4 – Existing Site Plan



Source: Blackbird Architects

Figure 5 – Proposed Site Plan



Source: Blackbird Architects

Figure 6 – Health Center Proposed Elevations (North and South)



Source: Blackbird Architects

Figure 7 – Health Center Proposed Elevations (East and West)



Source: Blackbird Architects

V. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The 296-acre portion of The Thacher School campus (APN 014-0-130-050) was first documented in the *1985 County of Ventura Cultural Heritage Survey Phase III: Ojai* prepared by Judith Triem and assigned a “3D” National Register Status Code, indicating that the site was considered eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places as a contributor to a Historic District through survey evaluation.

On December 12, 2000, the Ventura County Board of Supervisors designated The Thacher School campus as a Site of Merit.

In July 2016, Thacher School’s historic resource consultant, Historic Resources Group (HRG) completed an intensive-level survey and a historic context statement of the entire site. The report considered the historical integrity of all existing buildings on the campus, with input provided by the CHB.

On January 8, 2018, the CHB recommended approval of the Thacher School Historic District National Register nomination to the State Historical Resources Commission. It was noted that the district contained 38 contributing resources within the period of significance (1889 to 1953), consisting of 24 buildings, two structures, five objects, and seven sites. On April 4, 2019, the Thacher School Historic District was officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Historic District contains a configuration of buildings, structures, objects, and sites significant for their association with the development of The Thacher School, the Ojai Valley, and the City of Ojai (originally developed as the town of Nordhoff).

In April 2026, HRG prepared a historic resources impact analysis (Exhibit 4) addressing the historic integrity of the Thacher School Historic District with the demolition of the remaining Upper Tennis Courts, a district contributor. The Upper Tennis Courts, built circa 1895, were not found eligible for listing or designation as an individual historic resource under the National Register or California Register of Historic Resources, but are considered a contributing resource to the Thacher School Historic District.

The Thacher School Historic District

First established in 1889, The Thacher School has a rich and complex history, spanning from its early days as a ranch and ad hoc boarding school operated by Sherman Day Thacher to its establishment as a robust secondary educational institution in the second half of the 20th century.¹ It is the third oldest continuously operating boarding school in the state, and the oldest of several private schools in the

¹ Historic Resources Group, *Thacher School Health & Wellness Center Historic Resources Impacts Analysis*, April 2026.

Ojai Valley.² The period of significance for the Thacher School Historic District is 1895 to 1953.³ This period encompasses the construction of the earliest extant buildings on campus, as well as, the school's transition to a more conventional institutional operation during the first half of the 20th century. Construction activity which took place on campus during the period of significance reflects the school's earliest development efforts, both as a ranch and as an organized educational institution and embody the original pastoral aesthetic and rustic character which has long been associated with the character and identity of The Thacher School.

The boundary of the historic district encompasses the central academic core of the campus, the stable area, and the Gymkhana field. These areas contain the highest concentration of buildings, structures, objects, and sites dating from The Thacher School's important historic periods.⁴ The boundary removes those portions of the campus that were not actively developed during the periods of significance or have been redeveloped such that their period development is no longer discernible.⁵ At the time the district was listed, principal institutional buildings included the Dining Hall and Administration Building (1895), the Study Hall (1911), the Upper School Dormitory (1911), and the Middle School Dormitory (1937).⁶ Other contributing resources included a collection of buildings, sites, and objects which embody The Thacher School's ongoing emphasis on equestrian activities, such as the Gymkhana Field (circa 1900) and PTS Arenas (originally known as Jameson Field, 1949), with the Grandstand (1927), Field House (1951), and spectator benches (1935 and circa 1945).⁷ Other contributing resources which highlight the School's dedication to outdoor life in general include the Twichell Barn (1938), Hunt Barn (1940), Smith Barn (1949), and Blacksmith Shop (circa 1950), as well as, sites and structures such as the Historic Lower Field (circa 1890), the Outdoor Theatre (1908), and the Outdoor Chapel (circa 1920).⁸

At the time of its listing in the National Register, the Thacher School Historic District contained thirty-eight (38) contributing resources to the historic district. Contributing resources include twenty-four (24) buildings, two (2) structures, five (5) objects, and seven (7) sites.⁹ In the years since, one contributing building, the Camp Supply Building (#26), has been demolished,¹⁰ along with two of the six Upper Tennis Courts.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Upper Tennis Courts Development History

The Upper Tennis Courts are identified as a contributing resource to the Thacher School Historic District. As the first tennis courts constructed on campus, they represent some of the earliest organized athletic activities at the school.¹¹

The development of the courts was largely driven by the enthusiasm of William Thacher, whose skill and dedication elevated the sport to prominence both at the school and within the Ojai Valley.¹² A former Yale champion and accomplished intercollegiate player, Thacher not only excelled competitively but also actively promoted the sport by teaching others, organizing tournaments, and fostering matches between the school, the local community, and teams from other towns.¹³

Shortly after Thacher's arrival in 1895, four courts were constructed on terraced land west of the Dining Hall, defined by stone retaining walls.¹⁴ Two additional courts were added to the west in the early 1960s, followed by further expansion to the east near the former Bixby Handball Court (since demolished).¹⁵

More recently, the two easternmost courts and a portion of the adjacent retaining wall were demolished to accommodate construction of a new Dining Hall, completed in 2019.¹⁶ The CHB recommended implementation of mitigation measures for this project, including installation of interpretive signage on site and completion of Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) photographic documentation of the Upper Tennis Courts.

Today, the school's tennis facilities include the four remaining Upper Tennis Courts, along with the Van Griggs Tennis Courts located to the west, which were developed around 1970 and are located outside the historic district boundary.¹⁷

VI. CULTURAL HERITAGE ORDINANCE ANALYSIS:

Ventura County Non-Coastal Zoning Ordinance (NCZO) Section 8111-1.2.1.7 requires the issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness where a proposed project requiring a discretionary permit is located on the same lot as a designated Cultural Heritage Site. The subject property is a Ventura County Site of Merit. Per Cultural Heritage Ordinance Section 1371-4(b), the CHB shall approve a Certificate of Appropriateness if, in the case of construction of a new improvement, addition,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

building, or structure, or object upon the site, the use and exterior of such construction will not reduce the integrity of the site.

Cultural Heritage Ordinance Section 1371-4 requires that the CHB use the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring, and Reconstructing Historic Buildings (“Secretary’s Standards”) in its evaluation of the property and the proposed scope of work. CHB staff determined the standards for rehabilitation are appropriate for this request and evaluated the proposed scope of work against the standards particularly relevant to new construction. Each one of the applicable Secretary’s Standards is outlined in the table below with corresponding comments from CHB staff.

Standards	Staff Comments
<p>#9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.</p>	<p>New construction within the boundaries of historic properties may be appropriate where site conditions allow and where the design, density, and placement are compatible with and respectful of the property’s historic character.¹⁸ Consistent with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation, particularly Standard 9, new construction must protect the integrity of historic buildings and their setting, avoid altering character-defining features, and maintain the property’s historic function and relationships among contributing resources. New development should be carefully sited to follow established setbacks, avoid blocking primary elevations, and be located to the side or rear of historic buildings whenever feasible. Consideration must also be given to preserving the historic setting, including open space, building density, and spatial organization, ensuring that new construction does not overwhelm or isolate historic resources. The massing, size, scale, and architectural features of new construction must be compatible with, yet subordinate to, nearby historic buildings, while remaining clearly distinguishable to avoid a false sense of historical development. Where possible, existing site conditions that reduce visibility should be utilized, and significant landscapes, viewsheds, and archaeological resources must be preserved or appropriately mitigated if impacted.¹⁹</p>

¹⁸ National Park Service (2022, October 25), *New construction within the boundaries of historic properties*, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/taxincentives/new-construction-in-historic-properties.htm>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Standards	Staff Comments
	<p>The roofline of the proposed building will step with the sloping terrain, alternating between gabled and flat green roof areas along the building's east–west axis. Designed in a rustic contemporary style with a pronounced horizontal emphasis, the building features wide overhanging eaves and standing-seam metal roofing. Exterior walls will be clad in wood siding, and fenestration will consist of metal-framed windows and doors. This design approach allows the building to be compatible with the district's distinctive rustic ranch style while remaining clearly differentiated through the use of modern materials, consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards.</p> <p>The project would require demolition of all four existing Upper Tennis Courts, a contributing resource. While the area south of the new Health/Wellness Center will be maintained as open space, preserving the historic sense of openness and spatial organization, the removal of the courts would reduce the overall integrity of the district. Locating an alternative site that does not require removal of a district contributor would be preferable; however, according to the applicant, alternative site locations on campus were studied for the proposed Health & Wellness Center, and all of these alternate sites proved unsuitable for this important campus function. Key requirements for the building include critical adjacencies to the main dining hall and administration building, as well as proximity to essential infrastructure: the campus loop road and service drive provide at-grade ambulance access, the building will tie into the dining hall's emergency generator, and the adjacent sports field can serve as a medevac landing site.</p> <p>Based on these considerations, staff has determined that the scope of work is partially inconsistent with this standard.</p>
<p>#10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form</p>	<p>The proposed Health/Wellness Center is designed so that, if removed in the future, the building itself would not affect the essential form, integrity, or character of the district. Its location on the western</p>

Standards	Staff Comments
and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.	<p>edge of the district, away from contributing historic resources, ensures that the historic property and its environment would remain unimpaired.</p> <p>Based on the above considerations, Staff determined the scope of work is consistent with this Standard.</p>

VII. CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT (“CEQA”) ANALYSIS:

Pursuant to Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations (California Environmental Quality Act [CEQA] Guidelines), Sections 15060 and 15378, the proposed scope of work constitutes a project subject to CEQA. Review of the statutory and categorical exemptions under CEQA Guidelines Sections 15260–15285 and 15300–15333, respectively, indicates that the project does not qualify for exemption from environmental review.

1. Role of the CHB during CEQA Review of a Discretionary Project

The CHB is being consulted to provide input during the CEQA review process. The CHB’s role as a CEQA project reviewer is: (1) to advise and provide comment to the Planning Division (who functions as the Lead Agency) on designated Cultural Heritage Sites or those potentially eligible for designation; (2) where a site is determined to be a historical resource, to assess and advise the Planning Director whether a proposed project would have a substantial change on the significance of such cultural heritage sites or potential sites; and, (3) recommend to the Planning Director appropriate action in compliance with the ISAGs (Exhibit 5).

2. Public Resources Code § 21084.1 and CEQA Guidelines § 15064.5(b) (ISAG’s Step 2):

CEQA statutory and regulatory provisions help guide the CHB in determining whether a project, treatment, or other development activity may cause a significant adverse change in the significance of an historical resource.

The proposed project is considered to have a significant historical resources impact if it will cause a substantial adverse change of a historic resource as defined in Section 15064.5 (b)(1) of the CEQA Guidelines. A "substantial adverse change" is the physical demolition, destruction, relocation, or alteration of the historical resource or its immediate surroundings such that the significance of an historical resource would be materially impaired. Material impairment means altering in an adverse manner those physical characteristics of an historical resource that convey its historical

significance and its inclusion in a local register or its identification in an historical resources survey meeting the requirements of Section 5024.1(g) of the Public Resources Code, unless the public agency reviewing the effects of the project establishes by a preponderance of evidence that the resource is not historically or culturally significant.

There are several well-established and applicable criteria or guidance for determining whether a particular treatment, development, or building project will have a significant adverse impact on an historic resource, such as the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties ("Secretary's Standards").

3. The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Illustrated Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings and Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties ("Standards" - 36 C.F.R. Part 68)

As required by the Cultural Heritage Ordinance, the Secretary's Standards have been used to review this project and the Board's review must be based on consistency of the project with them. Standards Nos. 9 and 10 apply to this case in particular. As shown in Section VI of this report, the proposed project is partially inconsistent with the relevant Secretary's Standards.

In accordance with the Secretary's Standards, the National Park Service encourages maintaining the integrity of a historic district through the appropriate design of infill buildings at vacant sites or sites where new buildings replace non-contributing buildings. The proposed project will demolish the remaining tennis courts and introduce a non-contributor to the district. As stated in Exhibit 4, this will "reduce the integrity of the Upper Tennis Courts site such that it will no longer contribute to the historic significance of the Historic District." As a result, the overall historic significance of the district would be reduced.

To evaluate potential cumulative effects on historical resources, a one-quarter-mile radius surrounding the project site, consistent with the area used by the South Central Coastal Information Center (SCCIC), was considered. Staff notes that previous development within the district, including demolition of two of the six original Upper Tennis Courts, demolition of the Camp Supply Building, and construction of the Dining Hall, has already reduced the integrity of some contributing resources. The proposed project would demolish the remaining four Upper Tennis Courts, further impacting the district. While the new Health/Wellness Center would maintain open space and preserve historic spatial organization, its removal of one contributing resource and introduction of a non-contributing building represents an additional incremental adverse impact.

VIII. STAFF CONCLUSIONS:

The proposed Health/Wellness Center is designed to step with the site's sloping terrain, featuring a combination of gabled and flat green roofs, wide overhanging eaves, and a horizontal emphasis consistent with a rustic contemporary style. Wood siding and metal-framed fenestration allow the building to complement the district's rustic ranch character while remaining distinguishable as new construction.

All four Upper Tennis Courts, a contributing resource, would be demolished; however, the area south of the building will remain open space, preserving the historic sense of openness and spatial organization. Despite this, the loss of the courts reduces the overall integrity of the district.

Staff therefore concludes that the project is partially inconsistent with the Secretary's Standards.

Based on the above, staff recommends the CHB adopt the following recommendation related to the scope of work to better conform to the Secretary's Standards and comply with Cultural Heritage Ordinance Section 1371-4(b):

- **Recommendation #1: Nominate the Thacher School Historic District for listing as a Ventura County Historic District (Cumulative Impacts).** Prior to the issuance of the Certificate of Occupancy, the permittee shall nominate the Thacher School Historic District for listing as a Ventura County Historic District to address adverse impacts from the new construction on a County-designated Site of Merit and the loss of a contributing resource to the National Register-listed District. Once designated, any future projects within the boundaries of the Ventura County Historic District would require a Certificate of Appropriateness, providing a mechanism to mitigate cumulative losses of integrity to the Historic District.

IX. OPPORTUNITY TO SHOW HARDSHIP:

At the CHB public hearing on this matter, if desired, the property owner is provided the opportunity to present facts and evidence demonstrating a failure to grant the requested Certificate of Appropriateness would cause an economic hardship as provided by Ordinance Section 1371-4(d).

X. PUBLIC COMMENTS:

No public comment regarding this item has been received to date.

XI. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

Pursuant to Ordinance Section 1371-4, the CHB may identify project modifications for the applicant's review and consideration. Staff is recommending the CHB take the following actions regarding the request:

1. **CONDUCT** public hearing, **RECEIVE** oral and written testimony, and **CONSIDER** the Planning Division staff report and all exhibits and attachments hereto;
2. **REVIEW** and **COMMENT** on the proposed project in accordance with the County of Ventura Initial Study Assessment Guidelines (ISAGs) Section 13 (Historical Resources), Section 13.3.2 (Impact Analysis)(Exhibit 5), based on the preceding evidence and analysis;
3. **FIND** whether the proposed project meets the requirements of the Ventura County Cultural Heritage Ordinance Section 1371-4(b); and
4. If the requisite finding can be made based on the preceding evidence and analysis, **APPROVE** the Certificate of Appropriateness (Ordinance Section 1371-4) with any recommendations determined necessary to better conform to the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards*.

Prepared by:



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Reviewed by:



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Exhibits:

- Exhibit 1 – Proposed Plans and Elevations
- Exhibit 2 – Existing Site Photos
- Exhibit 3 – Architectural Palette
- Exhibit 4 – Historic Resources Impacts Analysis, dated April 2026
- Exhibit 5 – Initial Study Assessment Guidelines, Section 13 (Historical Resources)