ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
DRAFT REPORT

Project 531-325: Construct Primary Care / Mental Health Building

Report Date: September 16, 2020
Assessed By: Mike Quinn, Project Engineer

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Boise VA Medical Center
500 W. Fort St.
Boise, ID 83702
Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .................................................................................................................................. 3

1 INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................................................... 4
  1.1 PROJECT BACKGROUND ................................................................................................................ 4
  1.2 PURPOSE OF PROPOSED ACTION .................................................................................................. 5
  1.3 NEED FOR PROPOSED ACTION ...................................................................................................... 5

2 ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED................................................................................................................. 5
  2.1 RENOVATIONS ............................................................................................................................... 5
  2.2 ALTERNATE LOCATIONS ................................................................................................................ 5
  2.3 NO ACTION .................................................................................................................................... 6

3 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS .................................................................................................................. 6
  3.1 AESTHETICS .................................................................................................................................. 6
  3.2 AIR QUALITY .................................................................................................................................. 7
  3.3 COMMUNITY SERVICES .................................................................................................................. 7
  3.4 CULTURAL RESOURCES ................................................................................................................ 7
  3.5 CUMULATIVE IMPACTS .................................................................................................................... 8
  3.6 ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ............................................................................................................ 8
  3.7 FLOODPLAINS, WETLANDS, AND COASTAL ZONE MANAGEMENT .............................................. 8
  3.8 GEOLOGY AND SOILS ..................................................................................................................... 8
  3.9 HYDROLOGY AND WATER QUALITY ............................................................................................. 9
  3.10 LAND USE ..................................................................................................................................... 9
  3.11 NOISE ............................................................................................................................................. 9
  3.12 POTENTIAL FOR GENERATING SUBSTANTIAL CONTROVERSY ..................................................... 9
  3.13 REAL PROPERTY ............................................................................................................................ 9
  3.14 RESIDENT POPULATION ............................................................................................................... 10
  3.15 SOCIOECONOMICS / ECONOMIC ACTIVITY .............................................................................. 10
  3.16 SOLID AND HAZARDOUS MATERIALS ....................................................................................... 10
  3.17 TRANSPORTATION AND PARKING .............................................................................................. 10
  3.18 UTILITIES ..................................................................................................................................... 11
  3.19 WILDLIFE AND HABITAT ............................................................................................................. 11

4 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT ........................................................................................................................ 11

5 CONSULTED PARTIES ........................................................................................................................... 11

6 MITIGATION ........................................................................................................................................... 11

7 CONCLUSIONS ..................................................................................................................................... 12

APPENDIX A: PUBLIC COMMENTARY .......................................................................................................... 13
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Boise VA Medical Center is planning to construct a new standalone 22,000 square foot multi-story building on the northern corner of their parade grounds to provide additional primary care and mental health care outpatient services. This proposed action is in response to a shortage of outpatient space in relation to an increasing Veteran patient population.

The proposed action will produce minimal negative environmental impacts, minimal-to-moderate positive socioeconomic impacts, and will likely create controversy based solely on proposed building location. Taking all aspects of this assessment into consideration, the BVAMC feels that the negative impacts of the proposed action can be mitigated and that no further assessments or Environmental Impact Studies shall be required. A Finding Of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is anticipated after public comments have been received and considered.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

☐ DEFER ACTION
☒ EA COMPLETE (FONSI)
☐ SUPPLEMENTAL EA REQUIRED
☐ EIS REQUIRED
1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Boise VA Medical Center (BVAMC) is a rapidly growing level-II medical facility that serves the United States veteran population of the greater-Boise area. The main facility, located in Boise, Idaho, provides highly sophisticated primary, secondary, and specialty care to roughly 42,000 veterans each year. The campus also resides on the site of historical Fort Boise that dates to the early 1860’s and the beginnings of Boise City.

In recent years, the VA has made a concerted effort to increase veteran access to primary care and mental health care services. The BVAMC has a current shortfall of approximately 22,000 square feet of space to serve primary care and mental health care services based on the most recent survey conducted by VA Central Office. This project is in direct response to the shortfall.

The BVAMC has been approved by VA Central Office to construct a new multi-story primary care and mental health outpatient building of approximately 22,000 square feet in size. Multiple locations for the new building were discussed by BVAMC leadership (see section 2.2, below) but the northernmost corner of the existing parade grounds was ultimately chosen, as shown in Figure 1. The proposed building site represents the preferred action of the BVAMC and provides adequate space, accessibility for veterans, and complies with VA requirements for physical security.

![Figure 1: Proposed Building Site](image)
1.2 PURPOSE OF PROPOSED ACTION

The purpose of this action is to add additional primary care and mental health outpatient space at the BVAMC.

1.3 NEED FOR PROPOSED ACTION

The BVAMC campus has a current shortfall of approximately 22,000 square feet of primary care and mental health outpatient service space, as calculated by VA Central Office.

2 ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

2.1 RENOVATIONS

Renovations of existing facility structures were discussed and ultimately rejected due to lack of available space.

2.2 ALTERNATE LOCATIONS

Two alternate locations (A1 and A2, shown in Figure 2) were seriously considered during project development. The main benefit for both alternate locations was proximity to existing parking facilities for veteran access; A1 was also located closely to existing outpatient services. Unfortunately, neither A1 or A2 comply with VA physical security requirements and would not be approved by VA Central Office for construction. The area within the footprint of A1 also contains multiple critical utilities that cannot be relocated without significant cost and disturbance to the campus. A2 would obstruct views of Building 67 and would sit atop known historical anomalies, neither of which are acceptable to BVAMC leadership. For these reasons, both A1 and A2 were rejected.
NO ACTION

A stance of taking no action was not feasible for this project. A space deficit for primary care and mental health has been identified at the BVAMC and the campus must grow to meet the needs of an expanding veteran population.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

The existing conditions and potential environmental impacts for this project are listed within this section. Each attribute listed has been analyzed and assigned a potential impact level as follows: S – Severe, M – Moderate, MI – Minimal, N – None.

AESTHETICS

Existing: The parade grounds at the BVAMC are approximately 8.75 acres of flat, manicured grass and a mixture of mature and young trees. Roughly triangular in shape, they are bordered on two sides by roadway and by the historical “core” medical buildings on the other. They serve as a large recreational space for staff, patients, and the public and lend to the campus’ park-like aesthetic.
The Area of Proposed Action (APA) lies within the northernmost corner of the parade grounds and is approximately 1 acre in size. It is a triangular plot of manicured grass that is bordered on two sides by pedestrian sidewalk and a roadway on third side. There are several trees within the area of varying age and health. Buildings T111, 29, and 110 line the northeast side of the project site.

**Proposed Action:** The new multi-story structure is planned to sit within the APA; a footprint has not been designed yet. Multiple trees will be removed to create space for the new structure. Many of these trees are in poor health and are already planned for replacement by BVAMC Facilities Management Service.

Once built, the adjacent grounds will likely be restored to their current standard with new sod, trees, and native low-water plantings. The new structure will be constructed primarily of red brick to tie-in with the adjacent buildings. Special consideration will also be given to the height and setback of the new building to minimize the “hiding” of existing buildings. The proposed location provides the best-case scenario in this category, as the existing buildings T111, 29, and 110 do not contribute significantly to the historical “core” buildings along the BVAMC front.

### 3.2 AIR QUALITY

**Existing:** The BVAMC has over 50 buildings spread across 58 acres of land and does contribute low-to-normal amounts of air pollution due primarily to HVAC systems. Most of these systems, however, are high-efficiency and are properly maintained to limit pollution.

**Proposed Action:** The new building will have its own dedicated HVAC system. No natural fuel-fired systems are planned for installation. The VA has a strict set of design parameters called the “Guiding Principles” (similar to LEED or Green Globes) that sets efficient design parameters for all VA structures of this nature. During construction, there will be an increase in air pollution due to construction equipment and contractor vehicles. The main offender during construction on the BVAMC campus typically comes from diesel fumes associated with large construction equipment. Mitigation efforts for excessive fumes consist of scrubbers and coordinated HVAC shutdowns for surrounding buildings. Once construction is completed, no noticeable decrease in air quality should be detectable.

### 3.3 COMMUNITY SERVICES

**Existing:** The parade grounds see low-to-moderate use from staff, patients, and the public. The APA typically sees sedentary use and has multiple picnic tables. Group activities are usually conducted in the larger, more open portions of the parade grounds.

**Proposed Action:** During construction, the APA will be closed and fenced off for safety. The new design will likely include multiple seating areas to replace the existing picnic tables.

### 3.4 CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Existing:** The BVAMC campus is historically significant and the majority of construction-related activities are coordinated with the Idaho State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO) as directed by their current programmatic agreement. The parade grounds, as they are commonly referred to and as mentioned in this document, are not the actual historical parade grounds of Fort Boise. The BVAMC has maintained the current parade grounds as an open space to commemorate the historical parade grounds. The current parade grounds have been largely undisturbed outside of normal irrigation operations.
Proposed Action: Based on the level of impact within the APA, the Section 106 process has been started between the BVAMC and SHPO. The BVAMC is currently seeking public input (comment period closes on October 21, 2020) on the general project scope and has reached out to multiple local organizations including: North End Neighborhood Association, East End Neighborhood Association, Downtown Boise Association, and Preservation Idaho.

The APA and surrounding areas will be surveyed by a qualified archaeologist using a non-invasive ground penetrating radar to scan for subsurface anomalies. Based on the results of the initial survey, follow-on surveys and/or digging operations could take place. All work associated with cultural resources will be closely coordinated with SHPO until all Section 106 requirements have been completed.

3.5 CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

Existing: Within the past 10+ years, it is “normal” for multiple construction projects to happen concurrently at the BVAMC.

Proposed Action: At this time, there is one known project that will be adjacent to the APA and that is to construct additional parking to primarily serve the new building. Beyond this project, it is difficult to project the quantity of concurrent project due to funding cycle limitations of the VA. It is a safe assumption that at least one other construction project will take place on the BVAMC campus during the construction period of this proposed action.

During all construction activities at the BVAMC, the engineering office works with VA Police and grounds management to ensure that roadways and patient access remain operational. Typical mitigative actions include temporary roadway detours, traffic monitors, and off-hour construction deliveries.

3.6 ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Existing: The BVAMC campus is approximately 58 acres in size and is located near downtown Boise, Idaho. Refer to other Section 3 components for in-depth information about the existing environment.

Proposed Action: No new land acquisitions will be performed by the proposed action and all work will take place within the existing BVAMC grounds.

3.7 FLOODPLAINS, WETLANDS, AND COASTAL ZONE MANAGEMENT

Existing: The land that the BVAMC occupies is classified as a “D” flood hazard zone as defined by FEMA, meaning that the hazard is undetermined and no flood hazard analysis is on file. All immediately surrounding areas are classified as “X” flood hazard zones, meaning a minimal flood hazard (above 500-year flood level).

Proposed Action: The proposed action will not affect the local floodplain.

3.8 GEOLOGY AND SOILS

Existing: Numerous geotechnical reports have been generated for subsurface conditions at the BVAMC within the last decade. Typically, the soils within the first 10 feet of depth are silty sand, sandy lean clay, or poorly graded gravel with sand.

Proposed Action: The proposed action will be of slab-on-grade construction and is not likely to require excavations of more than 10 feet in depth. A new project-specific geotechnical report will be generated during the design phase to ensure proper soil bearing capacities and foundation designs are obtained. The BVAMC does not anticipate any impacts to local geology or soils outside of this scope.
3.9 HYDROLOGY AND WATER QUALITY

Existing: The BVAMC retains all site-generated storm water in underground, sediment separated drainage fields. All potable water on campus is provided by Suez.

Proposed Action: The proposed action will follow precedent on campus and will be connected to existing potable water mains. All stormwater will be collected and retained on site.

3.10 LAND USE

Existing: The APA is a largely unused portion of the parade grounds due to the sidewalks and roadway that line its perimeter. A small amount of people use the picnic tables for lunch and small gatherings (training and meetings during COVID). The area is too small to host any sporting activities.

Proposed Action: During construction, the APA will be closed and fenced off for safety. The new design will likely include multiple seating areas to replace the existing picnic tables.

3.11 NOISE

Existing: The BVAMC is within a typical urban environment and borders the north end residential neighborhood along its northern boundary. The campus produces standard noise levels as would be expected of a similar medical facility; the primary contributor of noise is HVAC equipment.

Proposed Action: The proposed action would cause an increase in contributed noise during construction due to large construction equipment, additional vehicles, and typical construction-related trades work. Normal construction operating hours at the BVAMC are from 08:00 – 16:30 Monday through Friday.

Once completed, the only additional noise from the proposed action will be from HVAC equipment. The BVAMC plans to include special design parameters to minimize noise projection into surrounding residential areas from the new HVAC equipment.

3.12 POTENTIAL FOR GENERATING SUBSTANTIAL CONTROVERSY

Existing: The parade grounds are highly regarded by staff, patients, and the public alike. They contribute to the park-like setting of the BVAMC and complement its history. However, the current parade grounds are not the actual historical parade grounds of Fort Boise. The BVAMC has maintained the current parade grounds as an open space to commemorate the historical parade grounds.

Proposed Action: Moderate controversy has already been generated by this proposed action and it is anticipated to continue throughout the entire project. The BVAMC has already issued an initial press release for the proposed action (see section 3.4) and public feedback seems split between welcoming expanded services for Veterans and protecting the parade grounds at all cost. The BVAMC plans to fully review and integrate, where possible, public input.

3.13 REAL PROPERTY

Existing: The BVAMC exists on federally owned land.

Proposed Action: The proposed action will have no affect on real property since it will be constructed within the boundaries of existing federally owned land.
3.14 RESIDENT POPULATION

Existing: The current staff and Veteran patient populations at the BVAMC are approximately 1,500 and 42,000, respectively.

Proposed Action: The proposed action is in direct response to the need for an increased capacity of primary care and mental health care at the BVAMC. The projected growth over the next 10 years for primary care and mental health care services in Boise (per VA Central Office figures) are 53.3% and 63.4%, respectively, and the available services provided by the BVAMC need to increase to meet these needs. The proposed action will also add additional staff to keep up with the increase in Veteran population.

A negative impact of this growth will be an increase in daily vehicular traffic and parking facilities on campus. This anticipated impact will add stress to the existing roadways and parking facilities. A separate project has been approved to design a new surface parking lot adjacent to this proposed action and a separate environmental assessment will be conducted at that time.

3.15 SOCIOECONOMICS / ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

Existing: The city of Boise is currently one of the fastest growing cities in the United States and is experiencing a substantial construction boom. The BVAMC mirrors this growth and has seen non-stop construction, renovations included, over the last decade.

Proposed Action: The construction associated with the proposed action will positively affect the socioeconomics of the greater-Boise area by adding numerous temporary tradesmen jobs. Once complete, the BVAMC will be able to employ a substantial amount of new permanent healthcare jobs including, but not limited to, nurses, doctors, administrative, and maintenance.

3.16 SOLID AND HAZARDOUS MATERIALS

Existing: The BVAMC campus does contain numerous instances of lead-based paint and asbestos, all of which are documented by their Safety department. The APA is a flat landscaped area with no structures.

Proposed Action: No lead-based paint or asbestos will be encountered by this proposed action. Typical quantities of construction waste are anticipated. No demolition waste will be generated except where grass and trees are removed to accommodate the new structure.

3.17 TRANSPORTATION AND PARKING

Existing: Lack of parking has been a recurring complaint at the BVAMC. A new parking garage was recently built which dramatically helped the shortage. The existing roadways within campus are in good condition.

Proposed Action: During construction, transportation and parking disturbances are expected to be minimal. The majority of construction workers will park within their jobsite and all large material or equipment deliveries can be scheduled at off-hours.

After construction is complete, parking shortages are expected until a separate, adjacent parking lot can be built.
3.18 UTILITIES

*Existing*: The BVAMC receives utility connections from local providers such as Suez (potable water), Idaho Power (electricity), Intermountain Gas (natural gas), and City of Boise (sanitary sewer). Fire suppression and irrigation water is pumped and stored onsite from a VA-owned well and reservoir system. Heating for HVAC and hot water is primarily provided by a VA-owned geothermal well.

*Proposed Action*: The proposed action will connect on to existing utilities within the BVAMC campus. The only new systems planned for installation are photovoltaic solar panels and a chilled water or DX cooling system (to be determined). All pertinent connection fees will be paid to local utility firms upon activation.

3.19 WILDLIFE AND HABITAT

*Existing*: There is a tree within the APA that holds a Great Horned Owl nest. Every spring for the last few years, the nest hosts a new round of owlets. The staff and patients at the BVAMC regard the owls highly.

*Proposed Action*: Unfortunately, the tree in question is diseased and is already planned for removal by Facilities Management Services at the BVAMC; the tree will likely be removed by this proposed action based on current timelines. The BVAMC has reached out to the Peregrine Fund in Boise, Idaho for guidance on relocating the owl nest. Before tree removal, the owl nest will be relocated to a similar setting on campus in hopes that the owls continue to nest at the BVAMC.

4 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement for this proposed action began on August 19, 2020 with a press release looking for general public input. The press release, required by the Section 106 process, covered this proposed action as well as the upcoming parking lot project since they will be adjacent. A copy of the press release can be found on the BVAMC’s Facebook page. Emails were also sent to Preservation Idaho, North End Neighborhood Association (NENA), East End Neighborhood Association (EENA), and Downtown Boise Association (DBA).

This environmental assessment will also be released for public comment for a minimum of 30 calendar days.

5 CONSULTED PARTIES

- Idaho State Historical Preservation Office
- Idaho Department of Water Resources: Floodplain Management Map
  [https://idwr.idaho.gov/floods/map.html](https://idwr.idaho.gov/floods/map.html)
- The Peregrine Fund, Boise, ID: nesting and relocation information for Great Horned Owls

6 MITIGATION

Based on meetings with SHPO, the APA will be surveyed with ground penetrating radar (GPR) prior to any construction activities. If any areas of concern are found, follow-on surveys or archeological digs will take place to properly handle and document any items that may be found.
This section will also include any mitigative efforts that arise from the public comment period of the draft environmental assessment.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The potential environmental impacts from this proposed action are similar in nature to numerous past projects at the BVAMC and do not constitute the need for an environmental impact statement. Mitigation efforts will be taken to minimize or eliminate the impact of this proposed action wherever feasible. The BVAMC anticipates concluding this environmental assessment with a Finding Of No Significant Impact (FONSI).
APPENDIX A: PUBLIC COMMENTARY

This section will be populated in the Final Draft of this environmental assessment.