



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

M E M O R A N D U M

DATE: June 30, 2026

TO: Balboa Park Committee
Agenda of July 9, 2026

FROM: Jon Richards, Deputy Director, Parks and Recreation Department

SUBJECT: Japanese Friendship Garden and Museum General Development Plan Amendment

SUMMARY

Issues – Should the Balboa Park Committee:

1. Advise the proposed General Development Plan (GDP) Amendment for the Japanese Friendship Garden and Museum is consistent with the Balboa Park Master Plan (BPMP) and Central Mesa Precise Plan (CMPP); and
2. Recommend approval of the proposed GDP Amendment for the Japanese Friendship Garden and Museum?

Department Recommendations

1. Advise the proposed GDP Amendment for the Japanese Friendship Garden and Museum is consistent with the BPMP and CMPP; and
2. Recommend approval of the proposed GDP Amendment for the Japanese Friendship Garden and Museum with the condition as listed under Staff Recommended Condition herein.

Other Recommendations - None

Fiscal Statement - There is no fiscal impact associated with this action. The Japanese Friendship Garden and Museum will be responsible for all design, permitting, construction, maintenance, and operational costs associated with the proposed improvements.

Environmental Review – The proposed project will be reviewed by the City of San Diego Development Services Department for compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The City of San Diego, as lead agency, will review the Project and prepare any required CEQA documentation per State CEQA guidelines.

Code Enforcement Impact - None

Housing Impact - None

BACKGROUND

Balboa Park is located immediately north of downtown San Diego. The Park is surrounded by the communities of Golden Hill, North Park, Uptown and Centre City. Balboa Park is one of the City's largest developed parks at 1,172 acres and is host to numerous passive and active recreational activities, cultural and educational institutions, and special events. Over 12 million visitors come to Balboa Park each year to enjoy the diversity of activities the Park has to offer.

Development, maintenance and management of Balboa Park are governed by the BPMP, the CMPP, the East Mesa Precise Plan and subsequent amendments to those documents. The BPMP is a part of the City's General Plan, and implements land use policies for Balboa Park. Therefore, amendments to the Master Plan and its Precise Plans must follow the Land Use and Community Planning Element of the General Plan.

The BPMP was adopted by City Council on July 25, 1989 (Resolution No. R-274090). Subsequent amendments to the BPMP have been adopted by City Council on December 9, 1997 (R-289537); on May 4, 1998 (R-290039-1); on April 13, 2004 (R-299084-1); on September 21, 2004 (R-299666); and on July 9, 2012 (R-307555-1). The Master Plan addresses the entirety of Balboa Park and provides general guidelines for development, maintenance and management.

The CMPP was adopted by City Council on October 20, 1992 (Resolution R-280920). Subsequent amendments to the CMPP have been adopted by City Council on May 4, 1998 (R-290031-2); on March 19, 1992 (R-296206); on April 13, 2004 (R-299084-2); and on July 9, 2012 (R-307555-2). The CMPP addresses the central portion of Balboa Park in greater detail than does the BPMP.

A large portion of Balboa Park's Central Mesa is included in the federally designated National Historic Landmark District (District). As such, any improvements within the District must meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties. Determination of compliance will be made by the City of San Diego's Heritage Preservation staff following advisory review by the Historic Resources Board Design Assistance Subcommittee.

The Japanese Friendship Garden and Museum (JFGM) is a cultural institution and leasehold located within the East Prado Subarea of Balboa Park's Central Mesa, adjacent to the Spreckels Organ Pavilion, the Mall, Plaza de Panama, House of Hospitality, Casa de Balboa, Pepper Grove, Centro Cultural de la Raza, WorldBeat Cultural Center, and the Palisades. The JFGM was established to celebrate the friendship between the United States and Japan while promoting Japanese culture, education, art, and horticultural traditions within Balboa Park.

The history of Japanese cultural gardens in Balboa Park dates back to the 1915 Panama-California Exposition, when a Japanese Tea House and garden were constructed near the Botanical Building as part of the exposition grounds. The Tea House and garden operated for

several decades as a cultural destination within Balboa Park before being removed in the 1950s to accommodate expansion of the San Diego Zoo's Children's Zoo.

Efforts to reestablish a Japanese garden in Balboa Park continued over the following decades through partnerships among community organizations, the City of San Diego, the San Diego-Yokohama Sister City Society, and the Japanese Friendship Garden Society. These efforts ultimately resulted in the approval of a General Development Plan for Gold Gulch that identified a Japanese Garden in 1972, adoption of a Master Plan for the Japanese Friendship Garden in 1979, approval of an 11.5-acre leasehold in 1984, and development of the first phase of the garden, which opened in 1990. The first phase of the garden was constructed along the western rim of Gold Gulch and included an exhibit hall, gift shop, snack bar, administration office, Zen Garden, and picnic area.

The current GDP was approved in 2003 and has guided subsequent phases of development at the JFGM that have included additional garden areas featuring a central stream and strolling pathways, the Inamori Pavilion complex and pond, Activity Building, administrative offices, and a parking lot. Existing amenities within the leasehold also include formal and informal garden spaces, water features, bridges, overlooks, tea garden elements, museum and educational spaces, cultural exhibits, maintenance and support facilities, and visitor-serving amenities integrated into the canyon topography. As a regional cultural destination within Balboa Park, the JFGM hosts educational programs, cultural events, exhibitions, performances, guided tours, and community activities throughout the year.

The Japanese Friendship Garden Society of San Diego operates the facility pursuant to a 50-year lease agreement with the City of San Diego that was approved by the City Council in 1984. Subsequent lease amendments in 1989 and 2019 revised lease terms and reduced the leasehold to approximately 10-acres. The JFGM is identified within the Central Mesa Precise Plan as restricted park land due to operational controls including admission fees, fencing, and limited hours.

The JFGM's development has historically been shaped by the unique topography of the Gold Gulch area, surrounding circulation networks, adjacent cultural institutions, and the broader planning framework established by the Balboa Park Master Plan and Central Mesa Precise Plan. Equally important is the JFGM's location within the Central Mesa, where it is situated among several of Balboa Park's most significant civic spaces, circulation corridors, and visual landmarks. The surrounding context includes:

- Major public gathering spaces, such as the Organ Pavilion and Plaza de Panama.
- Primary pedestrian connections linking El Prado and the Palisades.
- The Mall, a prominent view corridor with the Organ Pavilion serving as its southern focal point.
- A concentration of cultural institutions and visitor destinations that contribute to the character and activity of the Central Mesa.

These surrounding features influence how visitors access, experience, and move through the area and are important considerations in the development of the site.

DISCUSSION

Project Definition

The Japanese Friendship Garden and Museum is proposing amendments to the approved General Development Plan (Attachment 1) to accommodate additional improvements within the existing leasehold. These improvements include the following (Attachment 2):

- Construction of a new Cultural Education Center (35,932 square-feet), consisting of:
 - Education Building
 - Cultural Building
 - Administration Building
 - Amphitheater
 - Visitor's Center
 - Plaza Improvements including a 'Waterfall' water feature
 - Re-landscape around south and west sides
- Entry Plaza Redesign
- Construction of a new Children's Garden and Pavilion (2,300 square-feet)
- Installation of Kominka Farm House (1,750 square-feet)
- Installation of Sanmon Gate

Cultural Education Center

The proposed Cultural Education Center would expand the educational, cultural, and research functions of the JFGM through the development of a multi-building campus, which is currently the location of the JFGM's non-publicly accessible plant nursery. Located on the sloped site south of the existing Activity Building, the complex would be designed to work with the site's topography, minimizing visual impacts from surrounding areas of Balboa Park while creating new opportunities for cultural programming, education, research, community gathering, and events.

Education Building

The Education Building would serve as the primary venue for educational programming and events. The building would include classrooms, instructional spaces, and a multi-purpose auditorium designed to accommodate lectures, workshops, cultural demonstrations, performances, and community gatherings. The building is intended to blend into the existing topography while providing direct connections to adjacent outdoor learning and gathering spaces.

Cultural Building

The Cultural Building would house specialized facilities that support the JFGM's cultural preservation, research, and educational mission. Proposed uses include research laboratories, a tea ceremony classroom, and a library with archival collections. The building would provide dedicated space for cultural education, scholarly research, preservation of historical materials, and traditional Japanese arts programming. The facility would serve as a resource for both visitors and educational partners while expanding opportunities for cultural exchange and learning.

Administration Building

The Administration Building would provide office space and support facilities necessary for operation of the expanded programming. The building would contain administrative offices and conference rooms for staff, board meetings, and organizational functions. An adjacent outdoor gathering area would connect the building to the proposed amphitheater and other public spaces, creating opportunities for both operational and programmatic activities.

Amphitheater and Waterfall Plaza

The project includes a new outdoor amphitheater and Waterfall Plaza designed as flexible gathering spaces for educational programs, cultural performances, presentations, and special events. These features would create opportunities for outdoor learning and community engagement while reinforcing the connection to natural elements. The amphitheater would provide informal seating and event space, while the Waterfall Plaza would function as a focal gathering area and transition between the various buildings within the Cultural Education Center.

Visitor Center

The Visitor Center would serve as the primary arrival and orientation facility for the Cultural Education Center. The building would include a café, gift shop, visitor services, and an outdoor terrace overlooking portions of the JFGM. A living green roof would help integrate the structure into the surrounding landscape while reducing its visual prominence when viewed from higher elevations within Balboa Park.

Architecture and Materials

The Cultural Education Center would incorporate a contemporary architectural expression informed by traditional Japanese design principles. The buildings would utilize a cohesive palette of natural and durable materials, including thermally modified wood cladding, board-form concrete, natural stone accents, heavy timber structural elements, standing seam metal roofing, metal fascia and trim systems, and extensive glazing. Green roof systems are proposed on select buildings to further integrate the structures into the landscape and soften views from surrounding public areas. The proposed materials and architectural character are intended to complement the existing JFGM while remaining compatible with the broader cultural and historic setting of Balboa Park.

Entry Plaza Redesign

The Entry Plaza would incorporate a contemporary architectural expression while drawing inspiration from traditional Japanese design elements. The space would be defined by an Entry Structure consisting of five-foot-high fluted concrete walls with organic forms and a semi-circular, open-air timber canopy featuring exposed, radially arranged rafters that provide shade along the perimeter.

New signage at the Entry Plaza that is visible from the park road and open park land will be consistent with the Balboa Park Sign Manual.

The existing pedestrian entrances to the plaza on the north and west sides would be consolidated into a single northwesterly entry point surfaced with permeable pavers. Two approximately ten-foot-wide entry gates would be installed at the plaza entrance and would remain open during operational hours to provide public access to the Entry Plaza. When the JFGM is closed, the gates would be secured to restrict access.

The Entry Plaza would continue to function as a publicly accessible space during the JFGM's operational hours, serving as an introductory and promotional area for the JFGM. Visitors would be granted limited visual access into the garden from the observation deck, access the café and gift shop, utilize seating areas, and engage with interpretive displays.

The plaza would be furnished with new tables and seating, while the existing observation deck on the northeast side and much of the existing pavers would be retained.

The existing Café/Shop building would be retained and renovated, including refinishing the exterior walls, restoring the roof in kind, and replacing doors and windows to match the building's existing architectural character. The building would continue to serve its current functions, with the addition of a new ticket window on the southwest elevation.

Access to the ticketed portion of the JFGM would remain generally in the same location as the existing entry point. The existing ticket booth and trellis structure would be removed and replaced by the proposed Entry Structure as it wraps around to terminate at the Café/Shop, lining up with the new ticket window.

Children's Garden and Pavilion

The proposed Children's Garden and Pavilion is a new educational space located at the southern tip and the lowest elevation of the JFGM leasehold. This space will provide interactive outdoor learning opportunities focused on Japanese garden principles and culture, including environmental stewardship, gardening, biodiversity, traditional craftsmanship, art, and sustainable living.

The Children's Garden and Pavilion is designed to integrate with the surrounding garden environment through the use of compatible plant materials, architectural character, paving

treatments, and connections to existing pedestrian circulation systems. The area would include decomposed granite pathways, outdoor learning spaces, shaded seating areas with tables and benches, nature exploration elements, and an interactive waterfall feature that serves as both a landscape element and educational component.

The Pavilion is proposed as a new open-air structure with a maximum height of approximately 15 feet, inspired by traditional Japanese farmhouse and teahouse architecture. The design features exposed wood framing and traditional joinery that celebrate Japanese craftsmanship and building traditions. A thatched or comparable vegetated roof with overhanging eaves is envisioned to provide shade and reinforce the natural character of the surrounding garden. The proposed improvements are intended to support educational programming while maintaining the informal character of the lower canyon setting.

Kominka Farm House

The proposed Kominka Farm House consists of the relocation and reassembly of a historic Japanese farmhouse that will serve as a living cultural heritage exhibit and educational resource within the JFGM. The exhibit is intended to preserve and interpret the traditions, craftsmanship, and agricultural heritage of rural Japan while highlighting the cultural origins of many early Japanese immigrants to the United States. Through public interpretation, the exhibit will promote understanding of Japanese history, traditional building practices, and demonstrate the cooperative community practices that characterized rural Japanese village life.

The exhibit will feature a traditional Japanese farmhouse, known as a kominka, surrounded by agricultural landscape elements representative of rural Japan, including vegetable gardens, rice paddies, and interpretive displays of traditional farm tools. Visitors will be able to walk around the exterior of the structure and view interior spaces through open windows, providing opportunities to experience the building's historic character and construction while preserving the integrity of the structure.

The approximately 200-year-old farmhouse originates from Natasho Village in Fukui Prefecture, Japan, and represents a significant example of traditional rural Japanese architecture. Character-defining features include hand-hewn timber framing with traditional mortise-and-tenon joinery, plaster and wood exterior walls, tatami flooring, sliding paper-panel doors, and a steeply pitched thatched roof. The structure previously served as a local folk museum and was slated for demolition before efforts were undertaken to preserve it through relocation to the JFGM.

The farmhouse is proposed on the eastern side of the garden, east of the Inamori Pavilion complex, and at the lower garden approximately 40-feet below the elevation of the Organ Pavilion and the Mall. The farmhouse is designed to integrate with the surrounding landscape through agricultural demonstration gardens and circulation connections that reflect the functional setting traditionally associated with rural Japanese farmhouses. The reconstructed structure will have a maximum height of approximately 15 feet and will be carefully reassembled using traditional construction methods while meeting applicable structural, fire, and life-safety requirements.

Sanmon Gate

The proposed Sanmon Gate is located at a primary entry point to the Cultural Education Center and consists of the relocation and reassembly of a historic Japanese temple gate. As both an interpretive feature and pedestrian gateway, the structure is intended to preserve and showcase traditional Japanese craftsmanship while providing visitors with an opportunity to experience an authentic historic resource that reflects Japan's architectural and cultural heritage.

The Sanmon Gate originally served as the entrance to Jyousen-ji Temple, a Buddhist temple founded in 1652 in Mihama-cho, Aichi Prefecture, Japan. Constructed approximately 372 years ago, the structure was previously slated for demolition. Its relocation to the JFGM will preserve the historic resource and provide a new educational and interpretive opportunities for visitors.

The structure is constructed of natural wood with a weathered gray patina and topped with traditional clay roof tiles. The gate exemplifies traditional Japanese architectural style characterized by a heavy timber post-and-beam structure, a tiled roof with upward-curving eaves, exposed structural elements, and flanking wall panels that frame the central passageway. Due to its freestanding design and relatively modest scale, visual impacts are anticipated to be localized and compatible with the surrounding landscape and built environment.

Utility Connections

Water

A new domestic water service, meter, and backflow prevention assembly are proposed to serve the JFGM from the fire access road located between the Organ Pavilion and the JFGM. The City shall own and maintain the public water main and the domestic water service lateral up to and including the water meter. The JFGM shall be responsible for the maintenance, repair, and replacement of all domestic water facilities located downstream of the water meter.

A new fire water service and backflow prevention assembly are also proposed along the fire access road between the Organ Pavilion and the JFGM. The City shall own and maintain the public water main up to the point of connection (main tap) with the fire service lateral. The JFGM shall be solely responsible for the maintenance, repair, and replacement of all fire service infrastructure downstream of the main tap, including the fire service lateral, backflow prevention assembly, and all associated appurtenances.

All water utility appurtenances located along the fire access road shall be screened or otherwise integrated into the landscape to the satisfaction of the Parks and Recreation Department.

Storm Water

Storm water runoff originating outside the leasehold area is currently conveyed to a curb inlet along the fire access road between the Organ Pavilion and the JFGM and discharged through a headwall located within the JFGM leasehold. As part of the GDP Amendment, this off-site storm

water runoff would be rerouted around the JFGM leasehold to the satisfaction of the Parks and Recreation Department and the Stormwater Department.

For on-site storm drainage, treatment, and required Best Management Practices (BMPs), a new connection is proposed to the existing 30-inch reinforced concrete pipe (RCP) located within Gold Gulch. The JFGM would be fully responsible for the maintenance, repair, replacement, inspection, and clearing of all storm water infrastructure serving the leasehold, including drainage pipes, gutters, inlets, catch basins, drainage structures, permanent BMPs, and all associated conveyance facilities from their point of collection within the leasehold to their connection with the existing 30-inch RCP.

Sanitary Sewer

A new connection is proposed to the existing 8-inch PVC City sewer main, with a new sewer lateral extending from the main along Paseo De Oro to serve the new structures proposed in the GDP Amendment.

The JFGM shall be responsible for the maintenance, repair, replacement, and cleaning of all private sewer facilities, including the sewer lateral and associated appurtenances, beginning at the point of connection to the existing 8-inch City sewer main and extending throughout the leasehold.

ANALYSIS

Visual Impacts of Cultural Education Center

Heritage Preservation and Parks and Recreation staff evaluated visual simulations and sightlines from surrounding public areas within Balboa Park, including views from Pepper Grove, the proposed Organ Pavilion Parking Garage Plaza, the Organ Pavilion seating area, and other publicly accessible vantage points adjacent to the leasehold along The Mall. Staff determined, that despite the massing, scale, and modern design of the buildings, the Cultural Education Center's location below El Prado and within the existing canyon topography substantially reduces its visibility from the National Historic Landmark District and public spaces within the Central Mesa.

Heritage Preservation staff noted that portions of the proposed Education Building may be visible through the Organ Pavilion colonnade from select viewpoints within the seating area and along its perimeter. While staff concluded that visual intrusion would be minor, Heritage Preservation staff requested additional landscape screening around the Education Building to further minimize visibility of the new construction and lessen impacts to the historic district. This screening is indicated on the proposed GDP Amendment.

Visual Impacts of Entry Structure

Heritage Preservation staff's review of the Entry Structure is ongoing; however, they have reviewed the proposed materials and architectural character and deemed it compatible with both the JFGM property and the surrounding historic structures within the Central Mesa.

Architectural Compatibility

The architectural style of the proposed structures does not relate to any historic structures or architectural styles identified in the CMPP. However, it does relate to the general architectural styles within the leasehold. As noted herein, Heritage Preservation staff have reviewed the plans for compliance with Secretary of the Interior's Standards.

Lease Compliance

The City understands that the proposed uses are generally consistent with the existing lease. However, given the extent of the proposed development beyond that contemplated in the approved General Development Plan, the Economic Development Department, Real Estate Division (RED), is conducting a lease compliance review to determine whether any lease-related actions are necessary. Parks and Recreation staff recommends approval of the GDP Amendment be conditioned upon RED's confirmation that any lease-related actions deemed necessary as a result of its review have been completed, and that the proposed improvements and uses are authorized under the applicable lease framework.

CONCLUSION

While the Entry Plaza would remain publicly accessible during operating hours, closing the area when the JFGM is not open would enhance security, reduce opportunities for vandalism and unauthorized use, and help protect site amenities and facilities. Staff understands the challenges of after-hours security in the park and takes no exception to securing the Entry Plaza at night.

Based on the proposed siting of the Cultural Education Center, architectural treatment, integration with the existing topography, and incorporation of additional perimeter screening, staff finds that the Cultural Education Center can be accommodated within the leasehold while remaining compatible with the historic visual character of the Central Mesa. Staff further finds screening measures could appropriately address Heritage Preservation staff comments to ensure views from adjacent public spaces continue to be dominated by the character of the Historic District.

STAFF RECOMMENDED CONDITION

Advise the proposed General Development Plan Amendment for the Japanese Friendship Garden and Museum is consistent with the BPMP and CMPP and recommend approval subject to the following condition:

1. Lease Compliance - The Economic Development Department, Real Estate Division (RED), shall complete its lease compliance review and confirm any lease-related actions determined by RED to be necessary have been completed and that the proposed improvements and uses are authorized under the applicable lease framework.

ALTERNATIVES

1. Advise the proposed General Development Plan Amendment for the Japanese Friendship Garden and Museum is consistent with the BPMP and CMPP and recommend approval with no conditions; or
2. Advise the proposed General Development Plan Amendment for the Japanese Friendship Garden and Museum is consistent with the BPMP and CMPP and recommend approval with revised or additional conditions; or
3. Do not advise the proposed General Development Plan Amendment for the Japanese Friendship Garden and Museum is consistent with the BPMP and CMPP, and do not recommend approval of the proposed General Development Plan Amendment.

Respectfully submitted,



Jon Richards
Deputy Director

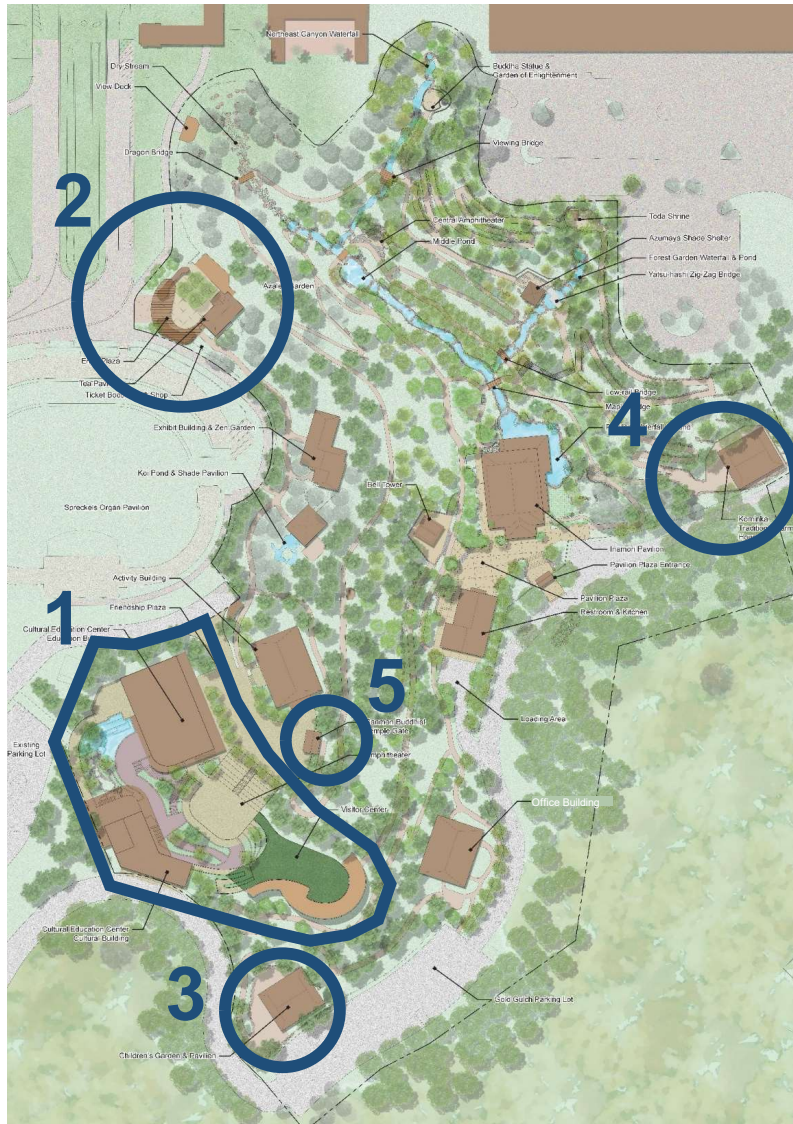
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Attachments:

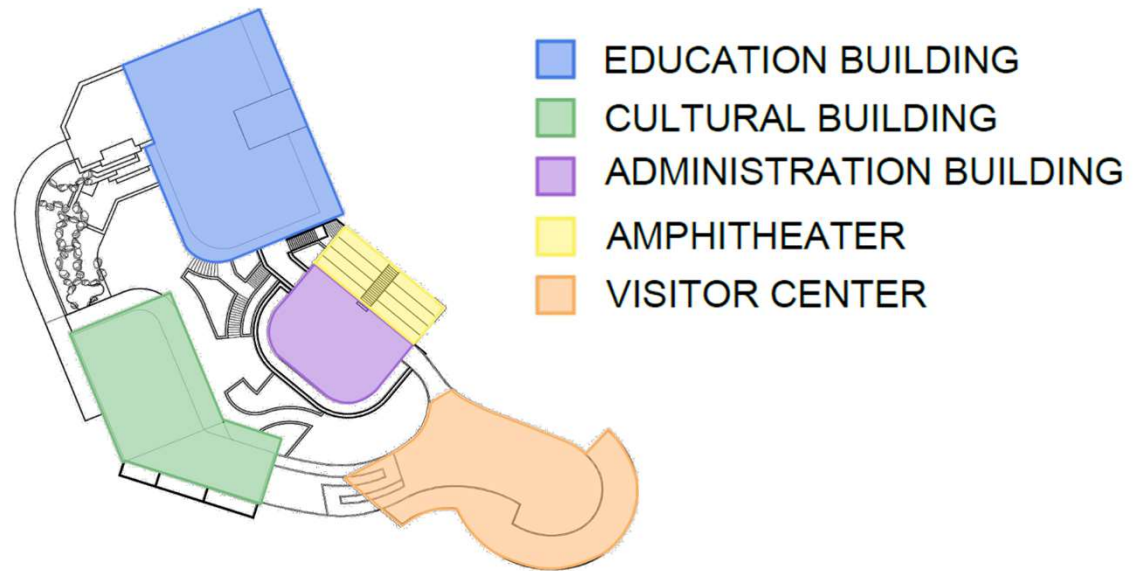
- Attachment 1: Japanese Friendship Garden and Museum GDP Amendment
Attachment 2: JFGM GDP Amendment Proposed Improvements

Attachment 2:

JFGM GDP Amendment Proposed Improvements



1. Cultural Education Center



2. Entry Plaza Redesign
3. Children's Garden & Pavilion
4. Kominka Farm House
5. Sanmon Gate