

DATE: July 3, 2018**FILE:** 7200-20 / Merville**TO:** Chair and Directors
Electoral Areas Services Committee**FROM:** Russell Dyson
Chief Administrative OfficerSupported by Russell Dyson
Chief Administrative Officer*R. Dyson***RE: Merville Fire Hall Project Update****Purpose**

To update on the Merville fire hall project and determine next steps including a public meeting in mid- to late-August at the Merville Community Hall, strengthening a volunteer recruitment drive in conjunction with the Oyster River Volunteer Fire Rescue and pursuing land for an eventual Merville fire hall.

Recommendation from the Chief Administrative Officer:

THAT the proposed Greater Merville Fire Protection Service continue working towards an auxiliary fire hall through a phased approach by:

- Hosting an open house in late summer 2018 to provide a project update;
- Confirming that the eventual service provider for a Merville auxiliary fire hall will be Oyster River Fire Rescue, subject to a financial plan that supports an interim cost sharing arrangement between the Merville fire protection service and the Black Creek – Oyster Bay fire protection service for volunteer recruitment, training and member supports;
- Strengthening the number of volunteer fire fighters in the Merville area by partnering more closely with Oyster River Fire Rescue;
- Seeking land that would be suitable for an auxiliary fire hall in the Merville community;
- Improving the service delivery arrangements for fire protection by assessing existing infrastructure and fire service delivery options; and
- Developing a long-term financial planning strategy for eventual funding to secure land and to design, construct and operate an auxiliary fire hall.

Executive Summary

In 2017 and early 2018 an auxiliary fire hall in Merville was proposed with a notion of providing a higher level of fire protection and first responder services that could achieve, for some property owners, a reduced premium for fire protection insurance. This project included specific actions related to identifying a service provider (including volunteer recruitment and training), land acquisition, equipment purchase and hall construction. Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD) staff have undertaken significant research and planning and are proposing that the equipment purchase and hall construction components be paused while a volunteer base is enhanced and land is secured.

Service Provider and Volunteers

The Greater Merville Fire Protection Service is under contract with the City of Courtenay for fire protection and includes automatic mutual aid with Oyster River Fire Rescue for north Merville properties. CVRD staff worked closely with the fire chiefs for both the City of Courtenay and the Oyster River Fire Rescue to identify levels of interest to provide fire protection and first responder services and volunteer requirements. Both departments are interested in assisting the CVRD and

both departments identify a real concern related to the number of volunteers required to operate a Merville fire hall. Recruiting and retaining volunteers for fire departments across British Columbia is chronically challenging and very few individuals have expressed interest in response to initial recruitment efforts in the Merville area. Rather than constructing and equipping a hall for which the CVRD has too few volunteers to operate, staff are recommending that hall construction be paused while a concerted recruitment drive is conducted in partnership with the Oyster River Fire Rescue. The Merville volunteer base can be strengthened to a point in the future where sufficient volunteer firefighter interest would support constructing a hall.

Should the recommendation in this report be approved, staff would develop a financial plan that supports an interim cost sharing arrangement between the Merville fire protection service and the Black Creek – Oyster Bay fire protection service for volunteer recruitment, training and member supports. The cost sharing arrangement would be presented to both a future Electoral Areas Services Committee meeting and also a Black Creek – Oyster Bay Services Committee meeting to ensure that all parties support the initiative.

For context, a minimum of 15 trained volunteers are required for an auxiliary hall to be operational, and best practices suggest that a training cohort should begin with 25 individuals and would last between 12 and 16 months. Therefore, in order to open an auxiliary hall by early 2020 as planned, a training class of 25 volunteers must begin by September 2018.

Land Acquisition

CVRD staff have worked with a local real estate firm to identify potentially suitable properties for a Merville fire hall. This work has included reviewing properties for sale that meet the preliminary criteria, responding to calls from members of the public who are interested in selling their own properties, and reviewing other properties that could be available or suitable in the community. Land acquisition is a key component to this project. Detailed design, cost estimates, community engagement and service provider logistical support are all dependent on a property being identified, if not purchased. Despite the staff recommendation to pause the fire hall construction and equipment purchase, staff would continue to seek suitable land. Should land become available, staff will report to the Electoral Areas Services Committee at an in-camera session. Through annual budget deliberations, staff would also consider and may recommend some funds be placed in a reserve fund for future land acquisition and other future project costs, thereby reducing any future borrowing requirements.

Equipment Purchase

The fire hall construction concept would have required funds to purchase a fire tanker truck, pumper truck and other miscellaneous gear and equipment as necessary. Should the new hall construction be paused, staff would refocus its attention on service improvements that are more achievable and appropriate in the shorter term. For example, a more concerted effort would be given to identifying community enhancements to improve fire protection such as water tower placement and equipment that might be located within the community. While these incremental improvements might not change a homeowner's insurance premiums, a stronger fire protection presence could be implemented.

Hall Construction

Herold Engineering has prepared preliminary design drawings and cost estimates for an auxiliary fire hall. The purpose of this work was to provide cost estimates that could have been used in an October 20 referendum for a loan authorization bylaw. Original (and very preliminary) budget estimates from late 2017, before Herold Engineering was retained on this project, placed the hall construction at \$500,000. Herold Engineering is suggesting that the actual construction costs may be

between \$900,000 and \$1,300,000, given their experience building other fire halls on Vancouver Island over the past couple of years. Appendix A includes the preliminary design drawings and building layout. While the recommendation in this staff report is to pause the fire hall construction project, the design drawings and project cost estimates will be valuable to provide suitable context for a fire hall when the construction project is ready to proceed.

Financial Considerations

A primary consideration for converting Merville Fire Protection to a CVRD service and constructing an auxiliary fire hall was to provide for insurance cost savings to property owners in addition to improved fire protection and first responder services. While adding an auxiliary hall for the area could lower fire insurance premiums for some property owners, particularly in the Seal Bay and Tsolum-Farnham areas, the savings would not be universal. Research suggests that many property owners would not experience the lower insurance premiums due to

- a) automatic mutual aid being available for northern Merville properties since early 2018; and
- b) southern Merville properties being within a 13 kilometer response distance from the Courtenay fire hall.

The insurance industry may however in the future move away from offering reduced premiums to those properties currently benefiting from automatic mutual aid and apply a higher rate structure for properties more than eight kilometers from a fire hall. This action would change the financial situation and might signal the appropriate time for an auxiliary fire hall construction.

Public Engagement

An open house is proposed for August in the Merville Community Hall. The contents of this report as well as some visual material illustrating the geographic extent of the services and fire protection will be provided. CVRD staff would explain the research and due diligence undertaken to this point in time. As well, the path forward could be explained and important decision-making points explored. The August open house will build upon newsletters that were mailed to residents and the CVRD website that contains current project information (www.comoxvalleyrd.ca/mervillefire).

Important messages to convey during the open house and through community conversations include

- The CVRD is keeping the community's interests at the front of mind by respecting the use of tax payers' funds.
- Certain key decisions should be made, such as confirmation that the number of volunteer fire fighters is sufficient, before constructing a hall.
- In order for the hall to proceed, the CVRD is:
 - o Finalizing the merger of the Merville and Tsolum-Farnham fire protection services, enabling a more coordinated community approach to constructing a hall;
 - o Bolstering the number of volunteer firefighters in the Merville area to allow the community to staff its own hall;
 - o Setting aside reserve funds for a future hall and equipment to minimize eventual borrowing costs; and
 - o Continuing to secure land to more easily facilitate the hall construction because highway access, community fit and geotechnical details will be known,

Prepared by:

Concurrence:

Concurrence:

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Manager of Fire Services

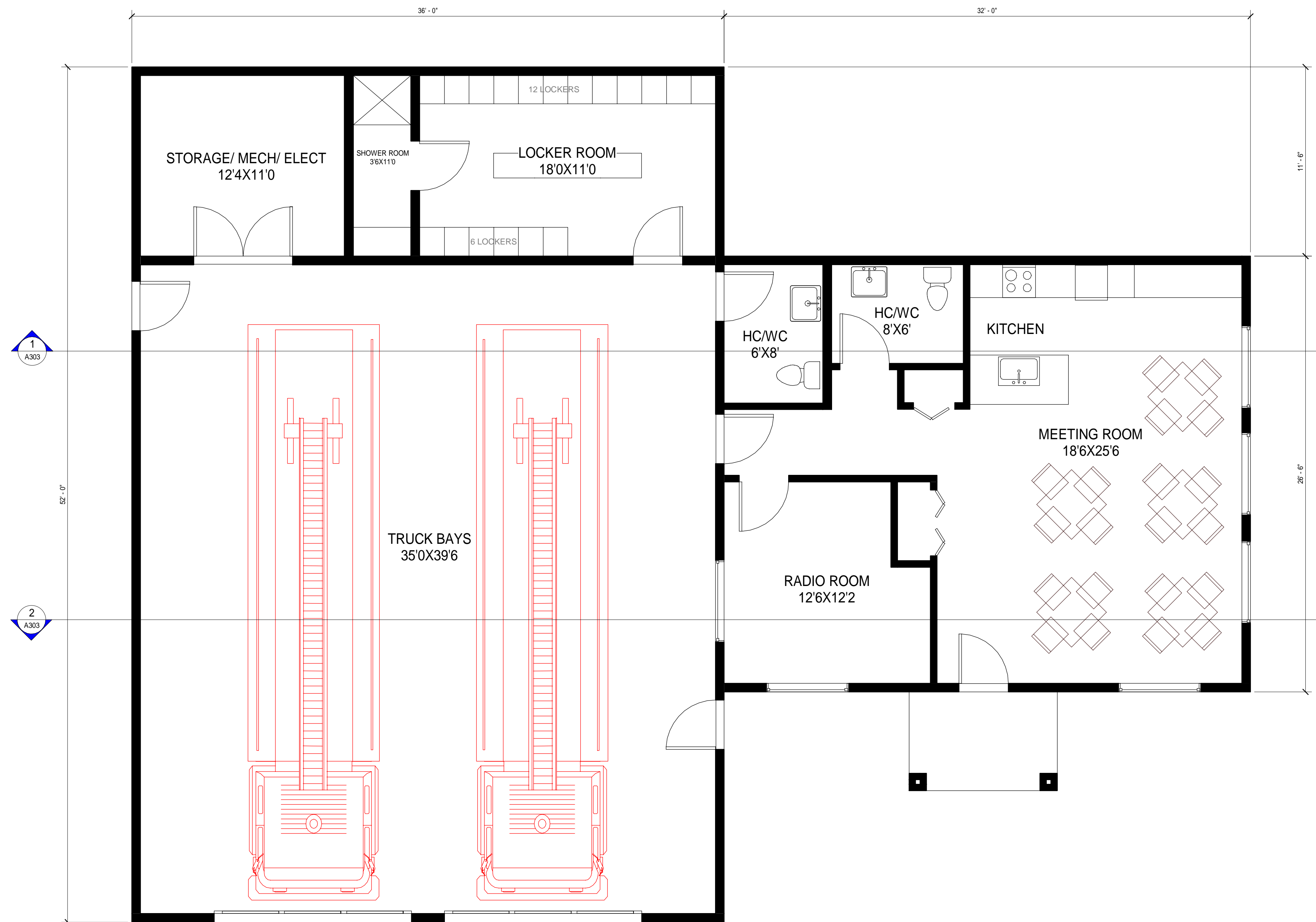
T. Ian Smith, MCE
General Manager of
Community Services

Stakeholder Distribution (Upon Agenda Publication)

City of Courtenay Fire Chief Bardonnes	✓
Oyster River Fire Rescue Chief Green	✓

Attachments: Appendix A – “Design Drawings”
Appendix B – “Merville Auxiliary Fire Hall Project – Current Status (July 2018)”

APPENDIX A.DWG



1 MAIN FLOOR
1/4" = 1'-0"
2720 SQFT

ISSUES		
No.	DATE	ISSUED FOR
1	2018.06.15	REVIEW

SUB CONSULTANT

MERVILLE AUXILIARY FIRE HALL

1243 FENWICK ROAD
MERVILLE BC
COMOX VALLET REGIONAL DISTRICT

HEROLD ENGINEERING
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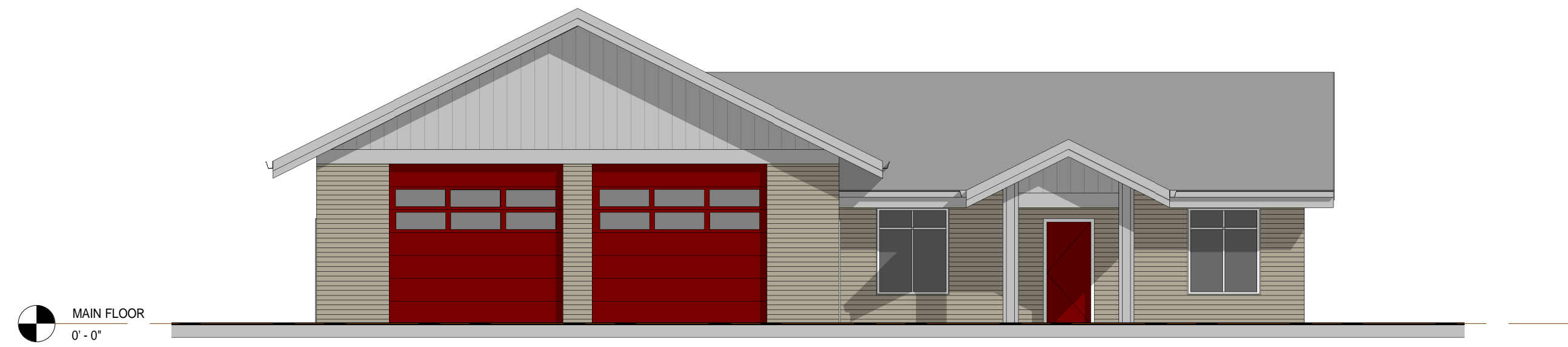
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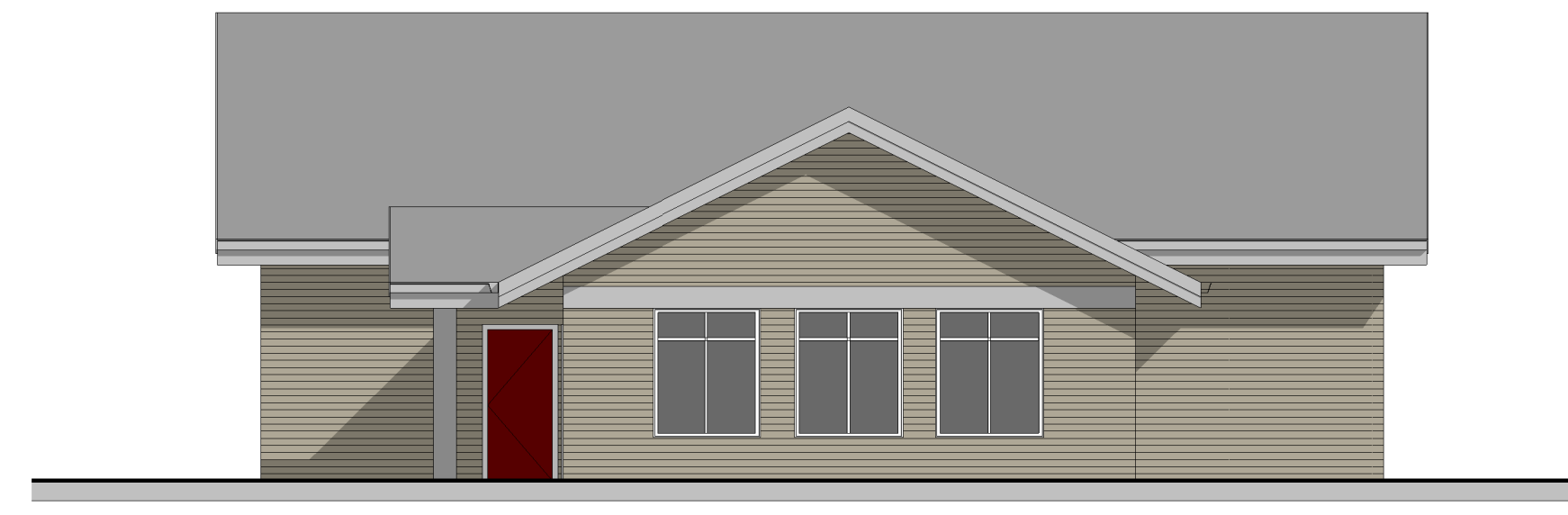
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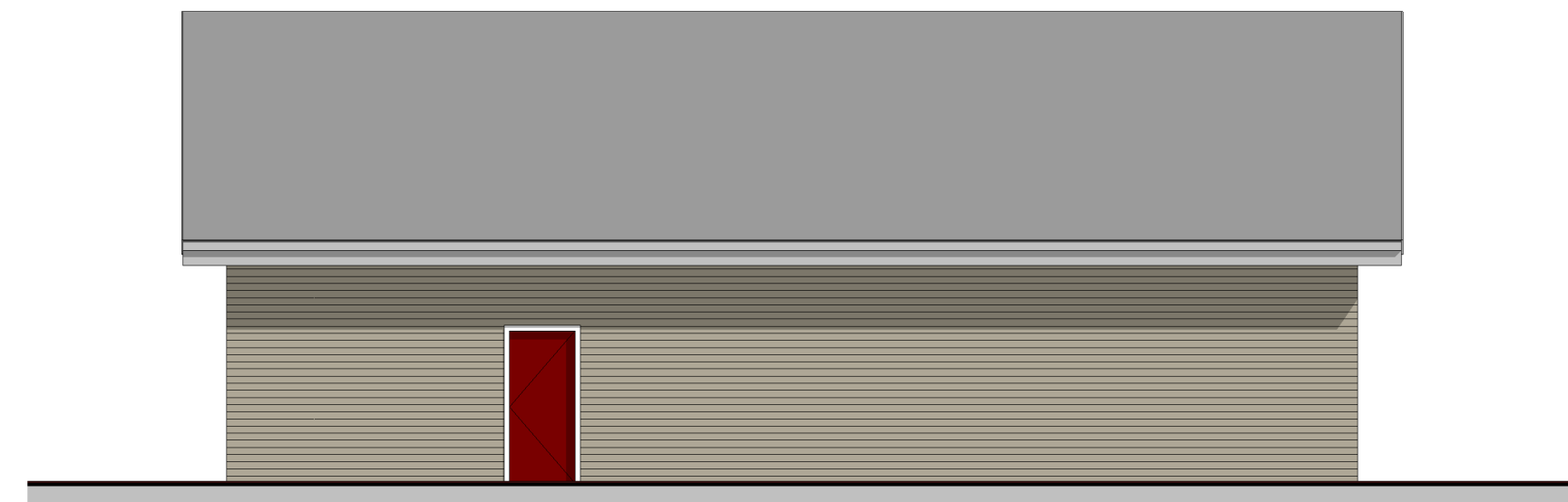
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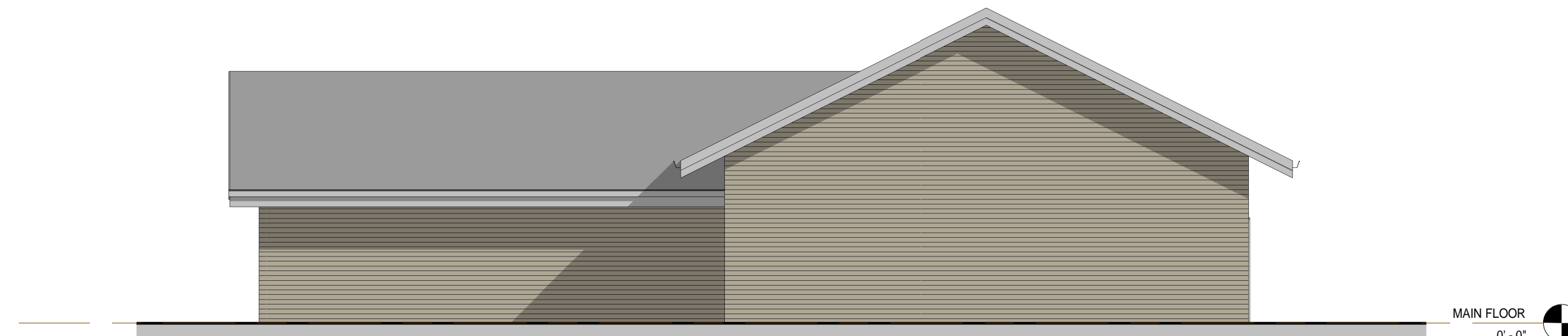
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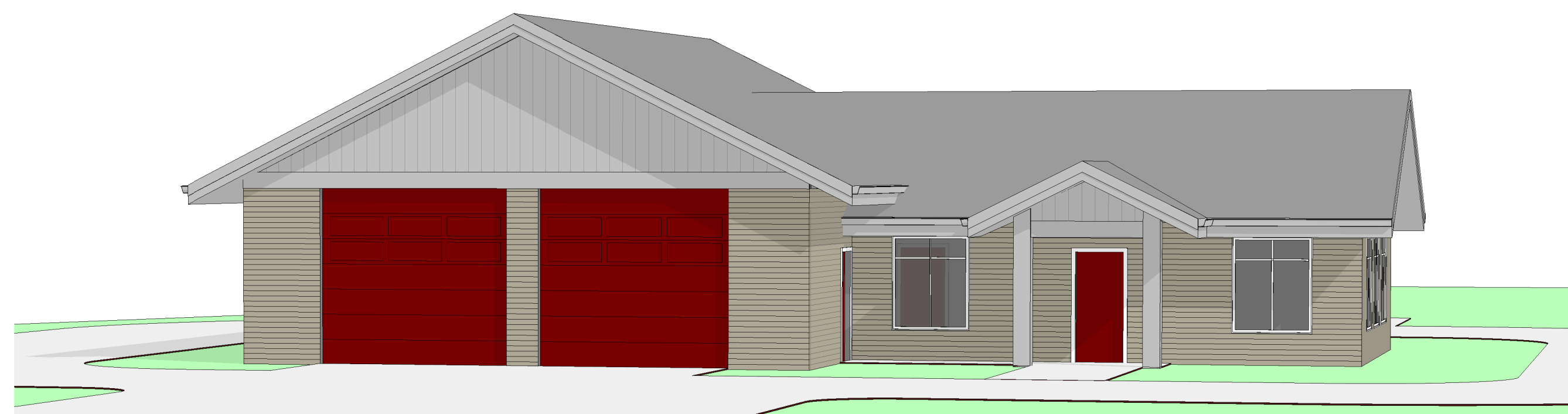
2 SIDE ELEVATION 1
1/8" = 1'-0"



3 SIDE ELEVATION 2
1/8" = 1'-0"



4 REAR ELEVATION
1/8" = 1'-0"



5 3D View 1

MERVILLE AUXILIARY FIRE HALL

 1243 FENWICK ROAD
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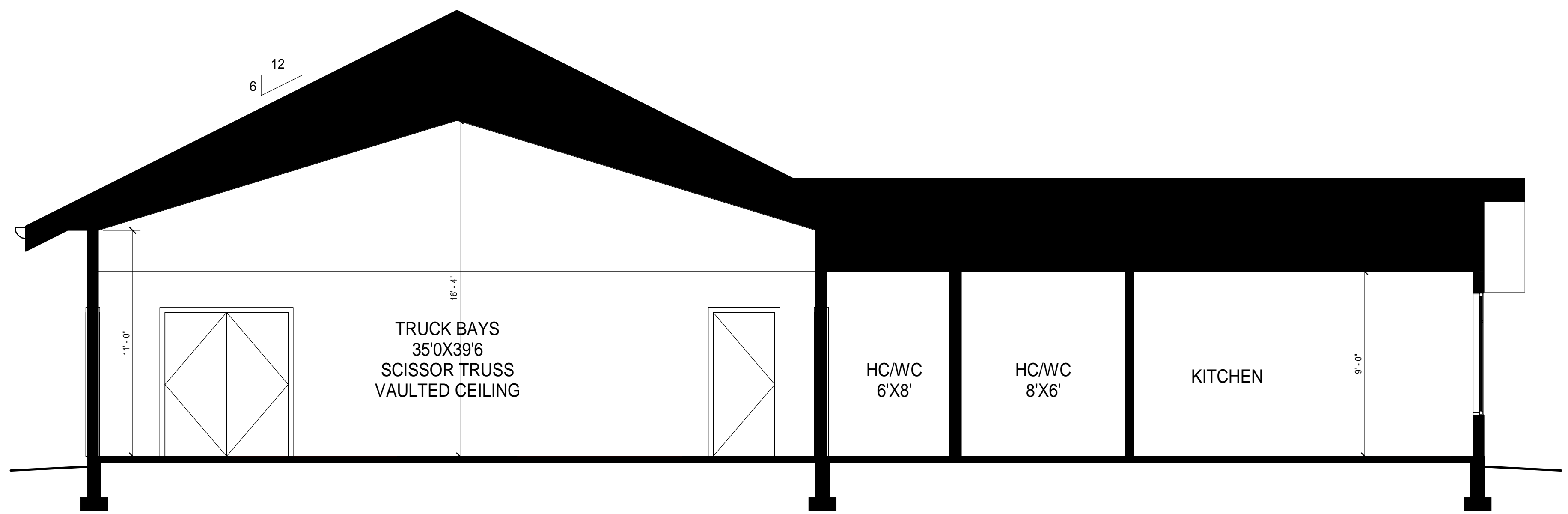
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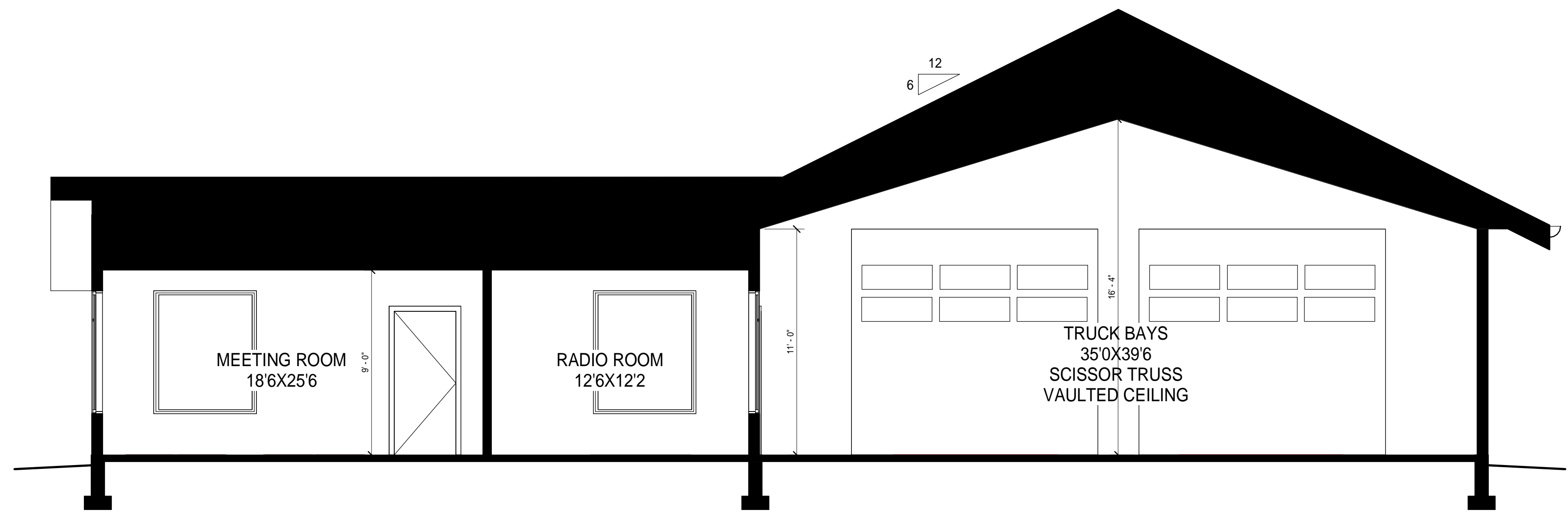
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1 Section 1
1/4" = 1'-0"



2 Section 2
1/4" = 1'-0"

MERVILLE AUXILIARY FIRE HALL

 1243 FENWICK ROAD
 MERVILLE BC

 COMOX VALLET REGIONAL DISTRICT

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July 2018

In June 2017 the Merville Fire Protection District converted to a CVRD service. Constructing an auxiliary fire hall was considered in order to, in part, reduce fire insurance premiums and also provide first responder services. The CVRD has undertaken research to respond to various factors including land acquisition, equipment requirements, construction costs and volunteer needs. To construct a hall and deliver a successful project, certain key decisions should be finalized, including confirmation of a sufficient number of volunteers available to staff the hall. The graphic below illustrates key factors for a successful fire hall project.

Merville Fire Hall Construction Project Decision Process	Ready to proceed to construction?	
	YES	NO
Merville and Tsolum-Farnham services merged		
Land acquired		
Draft drawings and preliminary cost estimates prepared		
Volunteer firefighters recruited and trained (requires 25 volunteers to start 12 to 16 month training program)		
Vehicles obtained		
Borrowing approval obtained for construction		

The CVRD is keeping the community’s interests at the front of mind by respecting the use of tax payers’ funds.

In order for the hall to proceed, the CVRD is:

- Finalizing the merger of the Merville and Tsolum-Farnham fire protection services, enabling a more coordinated community approach to constructing a hall and providing services
- Strengthening the number of volunteer firefighters in the Merville area to allow the community to staff its own hall
- Setting aside reserve funds for a future hall to minimize eventual borrowing costs
- Continuing to secure land to more easily facilitate the hall construction because highway access, community fit and geotechnical details will be known