



March 10, 2021

Dear Board of Regents

**Re: Approval of Housing Project at UC Santa Cruz**

I am writing about the housing project included on your agenda as Item #F4 and F5 in your next Regent meeting on March 17, 2021. This item has a long and tortured history. I had not expected to address you about this subject, but the item in front of you is a different direction that was anticipated and suggested to me privately two months ago. I was only advised about this recommendation at the end of last week.

**Since I was Mayor of Santa Cruz thirty-three years ago, local governments have pressured UC Santa Cruz to provide more on-campus housing.** One Regent casually told me a couple of years ago that local concerns about UC Santa Cruz growth were “NIMBY” related. I responded that the situation is much more complex than that. Simply put, it is the location of a growing campus of well over twenty thousand students and staff in the middle of a city whose population is about sixty five thousand – creating very large impacts on that surrounding community with no legally enforceable obligation to address concerns about the impacts that creates.

**I support the addition of housing on campus to meet the housing needs created by student growth.** The project in front of you came to the Regents before for approval, but was delayed because a court held that the Statement of Overriding Consideration was not properly vetted as part of the environmental review process. That vetting has happened, and the project is in front of you for approval once again. I support creating the number of housing units included in this project.

**There is one issue within this project that has united many members of the UC Santa Cruz community,** and that is the portion of the development that would cover a meadow on the east side of campus. Stakeholders that support additional UC Santa Cruz growth and stakeholders that oppose additional UC Santa Cruz growth are together in their opposition to the development covering this meadow.

**UC Santa Cruz has had the option to redesign this project to still provide the number of housing units contained in the project, but not cover the meadow.** This would be the most desirable outcome – meet the housing needs that results from the total number of units in this project, but not develop over the meadow. Initially, the response was “we don’t have time” in the environmental process. Yet the delay by the court suit provided this time, and it was not taken.

**There were private hints that the redoing of this project would allow for phasing the project, and the concerns could be addressed in that process.** I was relieved at hearing this, and believed there was a way to meet both needs – developing the number of units included in this project, and not covering the meadow. I actually attempted to reassure various stakeholders that there was the possibility of a good outcome here, but the current recommendation undermines those attempts at reassurance.

**I understand the University’s concerns about approval of this project.** The University is concerned that the long work on this project through the environmental process would be lost due to a delay in approval of this project. That is a very legitimate concern. But it is the latest in a series of actions that looks at the issue of the moment and does not have a plan to the address the singular concern that has brought opposition to this project.

**In moving ahead with approval, UC Santa Cruz has boxed itself in.** Now the argument is that the meadow must be built on to offer transitional housing for those displaced by this housing project. In fact, it has been said that otherwise the displaced persons would have to be placed in the local housing market, which is exactly what locals have been advocating against in recent decades. Using this argument as a justification for the lack of fixing this issue during the time that UC has had the option to fix this issue is outrageous.

**This is the worst way to enter a discussion of the coming Long Range Development Plan for UC Santa Cruz.** The central issue in the Long Range Development Plan will be the enforceability of the commitments that UC Santa Cruz makes on issues such as housing, transportation, water, and academic infrastructure. The fact that this issue colors that discussion only strengthens the argument and need for a method of enforceability. UC's commitments are nothing if there is not a way that they are meaningfully enforceable and not an academic exercise.

**What is your option?** Your option is the same as it has been in recent years. Do not lose your right to build housing through an already-completed environmental process, but phase it, or retool the schedule in a manner that you can construct the approved number of units and not build on the meadow. I understand that there were endangered species issues with the original proposal on the Porter Meadow but am convinced that the concerns can be resolved and am willing to help in any way I can to make this happen.

There are a number of us in the public realm that would like to bring the parties together about mutual interests. That can only be helped by signals from the University of California that you are interested in that outcome. Please figure this out in a constructive manner, town-gown relations heading into the LRDP planning process depend on it. Thank you for your consideration.

Very Truly Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Laird". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John Laird  
State Senator

CC:

Chancellor Cynthia Larive  
President Michael V. Drake, Regents President  
Assemblymember Mark Stone  
Maureen McCarty, District Director for Assemblymember Stone  
Melissa Whatley  
Chris Connery  
Paul Shoellhamer  
Supervisor Ryan Coonerty  
Councilmember Donna Myers