

**Re: March 17-18, 2021 Regents Meeting
UCSC -- Student Housing West project**

Agenda Items No. F4 and F5 of the Finance and Capital Strategies Committee on March 17,
and
Full Board Meeting on March 18

March 13, 2021

Dear Regent:

Introduction

The Student Housing West project at UCSC is a very big, important decision. It is one that will indicate the future direction of the campus as it grows. It is critically important to get it right. To help in UC planning projects, the Regents have directed that professional advisors advise the administration on best architecture and planning. At UCSC since 1992 this has been the Design Advisory Board (DAB), consisting usually of three architects and one faculty member.* [See notes below.] In reviewing this project, the members unanimously disagreed with the proposal that the administration is proposing. They are not the only ones who have opposed it. A former campus architect opposes it; many important donors to the campus oppose it as well as many trustees of the UCSC Foundation, former Regents, and alumni, faculty, etc. (See, for example, the recent letter "EMAC to Regents March 2021.") On the East Meadow Action website (<https://www.eastmeadowaction.org>), a petition has been signed by about 80,000 people opposing the proposal as well as voicing other opinions. Other letters and documents on that website explain authors' reasons. Moreover, it seems that the administration did not follow the Physical Design Framework accepted by the Regents for new building. (See letter to the Regents by Campus Architect Emeritus Frank Zwart, dated 3/8/19.)

Why should the opposition be so vast and significant?

East Meadow site

There are two particularly critical reasons, especially concerning the East Meadow site. One is often referred to as aesthetic, but it's much more than the popular understanding of aesthetics. It is part of the crucial open space with environmental and biological significance that also provides the stunning breath of fresh air and splendor in the spectacular view of Monterey Bay that attracted the Regents to the Cowell Ranch site in the first place and one of the two reasons that they overwhelmingly chose it over the Almaden site. This is the site that the original landscape architect, the famous northern Californian Thomas Church, realized needed to be protected, and then moved the campus buildings up into the forest -- it was an inspired, visionary decision, the result of which students cite as one of the main reasons for selecting and remembering UCSC for their university education. And it has been honored up until now.**

The view is one of the two crucial reasons that makes the campus so special and stuns every visitor that comes to the campus. Every time I see that view, even after forty-five years, it lifts my spirit as it does everyone else's. It gives a supreme dose of mental health, and students have described it as such. The proposed housing, despite the photographic mock-ups to the contrary, would significantly affect the sight as anyone on-site can readily ascertain.

The second reason for rejecting the East Meadow section of the proposal is also crucial. That area may be the most congested intersection on campus. To have a child care center for young children nearby is frightening. People dropping off and picking up children will seriously add to the congestion during many periods of time. Young student drivers who are impatient to get off campus (and enjoy driving fast) will be less apt to be paying close attention to the vagaries of traffic. I am fearful that children will be hurt, which undoubtedly would result in lawsuits. Will a disaster be waiting to happen?

Heller site

Furthermore, the East Meadow site does not need to be used. During the project and EIR discussions, many alternatives were mentioned that produced other solutions. They created possibilities to break up the huge dormitories of the west Heller site, which produce a more isolating student experience than the interactive colleges with their range of different levels of students and groups.***

If only the administration had not been in such a hurry to produce housing. They could have taken the estimated six months to file for the frog mitigation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Then that site could have been developed with more "air" and invention including connecting family student housing and the child care center more directly into the campus.

Administrative analysis of costs has also seemed peculiar. If cost is the main basis for the preferred choice, and since the university is a public institution, should not costs be publicly available, at least to the Regents? In any case, the East Meadow Action Committee has shown that the figures seem irregular.

If the project is to be redone, some think it would mean starting over, but this would not be the case. The developers have done a lot of site-work and planning in figuring out the proposal and none of that would be lost. It would not be starting at square one but perhaps starting at "square five" out of, let's say, 10.

Issue of Colleges: the collegiate experience

One of the most significant aspects of the UCSC undergraduate experience is the academic and social community of the individual colleges. This project destroys its benefits as it moves upperclass students out in order to fit all lower-class students into colleges. But it is the mix of different ages that makes the college experience so important. Older students often do an effective job of providing valuable peer-mentoring for the younger ones. Especially at the age when personal growth with its challenges to mental health is happening so quickly, this mix can be critical for many, if not most.

The chancellor mentioned recently that some of the Heller housing could be "affiliated" with colleges, but the daily interaction and spontaneous conversation in the space of a college makes a difference. It would be difficult for students ensconced in their rooms on the western edge of the campus to be an integrated part of colleges, several distant to the northeast. Travel time would eat too much into a student's limited free time.

In looking at the proposal, I believe it would not take too much to redesign the structures into a more collegiate format. Consider already the smaller entities of the graduate complex and family student housing that have been part of the planning from the beginning.

In closing

We are now in a different time from that when the planning for the housing was first begun. The pandemic and dreadful fires have made us rethink almost everything. The proposal needs substantive rethinking for the future of the UCSC campus and more thoughtful reconsideration of alternative solutions. This includes applying for the mitigation permit for the Heller site and perhaps using the East Campus Infill project previously approved by the Regents in 2009.

I hope that these remarks help to convince you that the best choice for the better future of the UCSC campus lies in rejecting the proposal, especially the lamentable portion in the East Meadow. I believe that history will see your decision as a turning point in the rich existence of our fabled campus. It is not an urban campus; it needs to be seen as different. I hope fervently that your decision will improve the campus in its tradition of construction built in harmony with nature, not attempting to clash with or eradicate it.

Yours very sincerely,

Virginia Jansen

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Member, Design Advisory Board, 1993 - 2006
Member, Campus Physical Planning Advisory Committee, 1986 -1996

Instructor, several courses on the UCSC campus plan and American Campus Planning and Architecture, 1986 - 2006

NOTES

*"The Design Advisory Board has responsibility . . . [to] maintain standards for the design of individual buildings and their relationships to other buildings and the campus landscape as a whole, including open spaces. Comprised of outside design professionals, the Design Advisory Board undertakes independent design review of projects and development plans (per Regents' policy)."

from <<https://chancellor.ucsc.edu/files/dab.pdf>>

Minutes from the Board's meetings "commented that low-cost housing and the proposed landscaping was programmatically incongruous for the [east meadow] site," maintaining that "there are other spaces on campus better suited for student housing and that the East Meadow site would be more suitable for other uses."

"The Board felt the need to reiterate that the enduring quality of the open meadow was well understood by all and underscored that there was a storied sequence into the campus." They stated "that the campus was 'making a big mistake.'" (DAB minutes, 3/26/18)

** It has been pointed out that in the 1963 LRDP, part of the site but not at the Hagar junction, was marked for building, although later thinking changed. The site itself is much bigger than what a relatively small project as family student housing and child care should occupy. (N.B. The 1963 LRDP also posited an athletic stadium in the south quarry and "some vertical accent that would focus visual attention" but nobody would take up those ideas now, and no campaniles are planned.)

***I myself went to college where we were housed in smaller residences. Today the college friends that I still keep in touch with come from this residential experience with one exception from my major. Being with upperclass students as a first-year student was informative.