

July 4th 2018

Dear Friends of the Meadow,

In mid-May, the UCSC Administration announced it would extend the comment period on the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for “Student Housing West” (which includes the East Meadow development). Many of us hoped that this signaled a willingness to seriously consider different strategies. The Chancellor’s announcement spoke of the need for more community discussion of the project, including alternatives. However, as the comment period closed last week, it was all-too-clear that the promised community discussion meant, essentially, the University telling the rest of us why their plan was the only possibility. The comment extension has gained time for the administration to strengthen an obviously flawed DEIR, (which received more than two hundred critical responses, some quite detailed, in the first comment period).

Inflated cost estimates for each alternative site or timing strategy are, it seems, the main argument in support of the current plan. When pointed questions are raised about the basis for the numbers, the answer is either more vagueness or assertions that since contract negotiations with Capstone Developers are still underway, the details can’t be released. Cost estimates are thus a black box that cannot be penetrated. The message is simply, “trust us.”

This pattern of non-engagement has provoked a vehement response from the Trustees of the UC Santa Cruz Foundation and Alumni Council, joined by various faculty and friends of the University, including EMAC. This group of knowledgeable and well-connected advocates pressed hard for a serious discussion of alternatives and budget estimates. The university eventually agreed to a meeting on June 11th. The Trustees, Alumni, and EMAC hoped that this would be a time to begin nuts and bolts discussions (with Capstone Development involved) on costs and alternative construction possibilities. Experienced campus planners and architects were ready to work with Capstone and key members of the Administration. Instead of the desired smaller working group the University brought eleven administrative staff to the meeting, imposing strict time constraints. While key questions were opened, they could not be pursued in any detail.

A second meeting was urgently requested and ultimately agreed to. (The Foundation and Alumni Council members are important university supporters who cannot be brushed aside.) This meeting, which was held on June 22, lasted longer and got into more details. But, again, the University declined to engage in practical thinking about alternative paths and adopted a stance of “we’ll take it under consideration.”

Requests for further detailed discussions have been met with arguments that the environmental review process, including the possibility of future lawsuits regarding that process, precludes sharing information. Formal applications for documents under the Public Information Act are being “slow walked.” At this time, it’s unclear whether the Foundation /Alumni Council/EMAC initiative will lead to more substantive discussions or whether it will amount to yet another charade, bolstering the University’s claims of extensive “consultation.”

An impressive, detailed report has been drafted by participants at the two meetings. It outlines alternative, flexible strategies, all of which would spare the East Meadow from development and could bring new student beds to campus more quickly than the present unwieldy plan. This letter, which we urgently recommend to your attention is now on the EMAC website: "Trustees/Alumni/EMAC final DEIR comment."

As the second comment period closes, "Student Housing West" (and especially its East Meadow dimension) seems dug-in. The Administration could try to push it through, despite all the protests. Or it could take a better path to the needed housing, without all the risks and delays, as we have urged. In the absence of any signal from the administration, we have to prepare for the worst.

The extended comment-period has at least delayed ground-breaking in the grasslands. For how long is unclear. Once the University decides which path it will take, it may issue a revised Draft EIR, but it will certainly then seek approval from the UC Regents for a Final EIR. Unless and until the many objections to the project yield tangible results, pressure needs to be organized at the Regents level. When the relevant Regent meeting has been scheduled (this Fall or next Winter) we will publicize how to register an opinion.

Once a final EIR is approved by the Regents, EMAC and others will have thirty days to decide whether litigation is justified.

Stay tuned...

And thanks for your continuing support.

EMAC Organizing Committee