

Waist Deep in the Big Muddy

It ought to be easy to reverse a bad decision, but history is full of counterexamples. As the war in Vietnam escalated under a president who couldn't back down, folksinger Pete Seeger sang of a captain who pressed onward into a swamp even as his troops found themselves "waist deep in the big muddy." This dynamic is, unfortunately, alive and well in the UCSC administration's current and future plans for development of the campus. The Long Range Development Plan, approved September 30 by the UC Regents, could, if fully built out, mean the end of UCSC as we know it, and could make the City on the Hill an impossible burden on the city and county below the hill. But the LRDP is a framework, not a blueprint. It shows what might be done, not what will be done. What happens in the near-term future will allow us to gauge the UCSC administration's commitment to sustainable and well-planned growth, and its degree of sensitivity to environmental, cultural, and design principles.

As we learned in her September 22 *Sentinel* editorial, UCSC's Chancellor Cynthia Larive remains committed to putting 140 sprawling low-density prefab apartments in the iconic East Meadow. Alabama developer Capstone Inc. first suggested this plan, in order to avoid working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on environmental measures that would allow the entire Student Housing West project to be built as originally designed, on the west side of campus. The Capstone plan puts only 5% of the project on the meadow, but that 5% is holding up the entire project.

We agree with Chancellor Larive that the university needs more student housing and a better childcare center. But the Capstone plan is clearly the wrong way to get it. Opposition has been formidable. The administration's own Design Advisory Board, for the first time in its history, unanimously recommended against a major development project. Every architect and planner with long association with the university opposed building on the meadow. The university's own Environmental Impact Report outlined several superior alternatives.

Building on the East Meadow was a plan guaranteed to stir up controversy, anguish, and opposition, and it did, from tens of thousands of alumni, from donors and trustees, from legislators, from many with a long history of supporting the university. They're still there, and they're still committed to a vision of a university that sees no contradiction between the best environmental and design principles and a commitment to serving the needs of Californians. The administrators who initially promoted the project are all either gone or leaving by year's end. They won't have to live with the consequences if the project breaks ground.

The open meadows spreading below the campus core have long been central to the campus's design and character. Meadows are precarious, however, and too commonly viewed—as doubtless the Alabama developers did—as mere empty space. They are of course highly diverse ecosystems, comprising a tremendous variety of plant and animal life, with complex geologies and hydrologies. Across many centuries, the Amah Mutsun were careful and attentive stewards of the coastal meadows, using fire and other means to keep them and their abundant life flourishing. Most of those who came to UCSC developed a deep love and respect for the

meadows, but it took vigilance and care to ward off irreparable destruction. In the early 1990s, plans for a roadway across the Great Meadow touched off waves of protest. Chancellor Karl Pister listened. "I took walks down and back up again," Pister told an interviewer. "I said there is no way that I'm going to be the one that wrecks the meadow."

The university's commitment to rush forward with the current ill-conceived plan made such a mockery of the design and approval process that the East Meadow Action Committee, enabled by a huge outpouring of financial support from friends of the university, felt compelled to turn to the courts. It shouldn't be necessary to go to court to stop such an unnecessarily destructive project, especially since its former champions have left or will soon be gone. Chancellor Larive can still listen to voices in the design and planning community, and, like Chancellor Pister, choose the wiser and more reasonable course. "We had to destroy the village in order to save it" was another phrase that circulated during the Vietnam War era. Will that characterize the course of UCSC's long term development? For an indication of the way the wind is blowing, focus on the East Meadow.

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