

UCSC and Student Housing: We Can Do Better

Our Santa Cruz community has rightly been concerned about an increasingly severe housing shortage and the role UCSC has played in creating that shortage. Since 2003–4 UCSC has increased student enrollment by 32% while completing no new on-campus student housing structures at all. The situation is now at a breaking point with no solutions in sight.

What happened? Had reason and expert planning prevailed, UCSC would now be close to completing the largest student housing project in its history: approximately 3000 beds of new capacity. But the University mismanaged the project so badly that construction on it has not even begun and there is no certain date by when it will begin. At best it will be many years before this project houses any students. How did this project go so far off the rails? And what does this say about the larger student housing problem we face as a community?

The project started off well: entirely on the west side of campus (and therefore dubbed Student Housing *West*), it enjoyed broad support. In 2016 and through August 2017 the necessary planning, preparation, and developer selection were accomplished. As of that August the project schedule called for a construction start in the Summer of 2018 and completion of the project no later than July 2022 — this year!

Then a small bump in the road appeared (as it often does in large construction projects). US Fish and Wildlife (USFW) was concerned about the habitat of a listed frog and wanted to work with the University to provide relatively modest habitat protection in a way that would not harm the project. Campus staff estimated that the process of providing that protection, which had been used successfully to build on-campus faculty housing many years earlier, would delay the schedule by about six months. So completion got moved to around the end of 2022 — still this year!

How did a potential six-month delay become a multi-year delay? In charge of this project was a Vice Chancellor (since departed) with no significant training, expertise, or competence in planning, design, or construction management. The sole focus became how to avoid that six-month delay. In haste and secrecy, the administration refused to work with USFW, reduced the site on the west side of campus by half and added development of the East Meadow, just inside the main entrance to the campus.

But no planning and preparatory work for building on the East Meadow had been done, so the project was soon delayed by a year in order to hastily address that missing work. To save six months the University immediately lost a year.

In addition, that decision, predictably and unnecessarily, turned a no-opposition project into a raging controversy. Many UCSC students, professors, and alumni, among them the University's most ardent supporters, vehemently opposed the project's incursion into the East Meadow. So did UCSC's own Design Advisory Board,

made up of prominent California architects, and UCSC's longest serving Campus Architect. It was clear that if UCSC persisted in the East Meadow version of this project, it would face years of opposition and litigation.

But UCSC was incapable of correcting its mistake. All UCSC had to do was go back to the original version of the project. All opposition and litigation could have been avoided and construction could have begun. But UCSC would not change course, and as expected there were multiple litigations, by multiple litigants. If this had been a competently managed project, a 3000 bed housing project would be nearing completion later this year.

There's a lesson here for the future. In its new Long Range Development Plan (LRDP), UCSC wants to increase the student enrollment cap from 19,500 to 28,000 in the next 18 years and promises that it will build enough on-campus housing to house *all* those additional students. They may intend to do so. But based on the last 18 years of experience, it is likely that the result will be ever higher enrollment numbers with inadequate new housing in place.

The problem is historical and structural. For example, in 2008 the University proposed and got approval for a large student housing project known as East Campus Infill. There was no opposition. UCSC got all the necessary approvals and the window for possible litigation came and went, leaving the project ready to build and litigation-proof. Yet UCSC never moved forward with the project. They still sit on the design, the approvals, and the litigation-proof EIR, and do nothing.

Another example of the larger problem: a major argument the UCSC administration made for locating part of Student Housing West in the East Meadow was that this portion of the project would be built at very low cost by a company called Katerra. This company was a start-up whose founders had no expertise in construction, but who convinced Saudi Arabia to pump more than a billion dollars into the idea that they could become a national high-tech construction company dramatically underselling their competitors. It was an extremely long-shot proposition, but Saudi Arabia and UCSC bought the pitch.

Katerra has since then failed completely and gone out of business, taking with it the Saudi money and a large part of UCSC's rationale for building on the East Meadow.

Today it is being claimed that the housing crisis at UC is caused by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). If so, why has UCLA been able to build thousands of units of housing in just the last few years, now offering campus-provided housing to every undergraduate who wants it? This in spite of the fact that UCLA has the smallest campus of any of the UC campuses that take undergraduates. Did UCLA get an exemption from CEQA? No. Like any competent developer, they worked within CEQA, did proper planning, kept the public informed (which is the main purpose of CEQA), and got housing built.

CEQA is not the cause of UCSC's housing crisis: it's the excuse.

The UCLA example demonstrates that what's needed, and what has been missing at UCSC, is a properly managed plan for expansion. The answer is not no growth, but growth prepared for and consistent with sound planning principles. It requires working with the constraints of the site and keeping the community informed and engaged all through the process. Last minute panic and haste — as in the UCSC example — derails projects and does a disservice to the community and to the students.

The key impediment to getting on-campus housing built is not that UCSC has no planning staff with the knowledge required to make these projects successful. UCSC's problem is one that many large institutions share: the people with the necessary knowledge don't have the power to make the decisions, and the people with the power to make the decisions don't have the necessary knowledge.

Year after year UCSC does not get additional housing built, the UC systemwide leadership tells UCSC it will need to take additional students anyway, and UCSC increases its enrollment as ordered.

At present UCSC and the City and County of Santa Cruz are at odds over UCSC's new 2021 LRDP. UCSC says, "Trust us, we will provide new housing for all additional students." To which the City and County respond, "We want an enforceable written guarantee that additional housing will be provided before the additional students arrive." It all comes down to the issue of an enforceable guarantee, something UCSC has thus far refused.

The question for the community is whether the City and County should accept a non-enforceable assurance. The past 18 years offer a strong answer to that question: "No."

The County has therefore filed suit under CEQA in an attempt to get that enforceable guarantee from UCSC. Given UC's exemption from local zoning, CEQA is the only protection the community has. If the County prevails, an enforceable guarantee might have the salutary effect of getting UCSC's housing act together, forcing them to do the good planning, preparation, and community involvement that make for successful projects.

We support growth at UCSC that is carefully planned, environmentally sound, and that values the ethos of stewardship that governed campus development throughout its first fifty years. These are principles that can unite and not divide our community.

THE EAST MEADOW ACTION COMMITTEE

We are an association of students, faculty, alumni, and supporters of UCSC. We hold UCSC in great affection and want it to stay true to its best attributes as it progresses. Full disclosure: we have litigated the SHW issue in the past.

For further information:
eastmeadowaction.org