

Palo Alto Daily News
October 9, 1999

Stanford polls residents about growth plans

By Andria Strickley

A number of Palo Alto residents told the Daily News yesterday that they feel a Stanford survey is trying to manipulate responses in favor of the university's long-range development plan. But Stanford spokesman Larry Horton said the survey is intended only to gauge the community's opinion of the university's land use.

Palo Alto resident Steve Fram said he was contacted by the Boulder, Colo. firm Talmey Drake Research Strategy Thursday night. The surveyor started out asking general questions, but then began presenting him with information about Stanford's land use – incomplete information, he said.

"I told the surveyor this really doesn't seem like an objective survey," said Fram, a 36-year-old computer engineer.

Horton denied yesterday Stanford is trying to sway public opinion.

"That's simply not true," he said.

Horton said Stanford will use the survey to achieve the best understanding of community attitudes it can.

Horton wouldn't say how much the survey costs, but Menlo Park Mayor Paul Collacchi said such projects typically cost around \$20,000.

Collacchi said he found out about the survey through an email yesterday. In his experience with previous Stanford surveys, Collacchi said, the interviewer asks demographically-revealing questions at the beginning of the survey to determine how knowledgeable the interviewee is. The responses to those questions shape the rest of the survey, he said.

"They're trying to get plausible messages in front of people who aren't really paying attention," he said.

Collacchi said Stanford used similar tactics to try to shape public opinion during its 1997 campaign to develop Sand Hill Road.

Collacchi said Stanford will use the survey's responses in brochures and in the campaigns of Stanford-friendly political candidates. He said Stanford will also integrate the survey results into employee emails.

Stanford used Talmey Drake to conduct surveys about the Sand Hill Road development. The firm does work for the Environmental Defense Fund, and conducts polls for Colorado newspapers and TV stations.

One resident said she was phoned by Talmey Drake Thursday night and was asked a long list of questions about how Stanford development impacts quality of life in Palo Alto.

"At first the questions were general and about Palo Alto after asking if anyone in the household was employed by the press or media," the resident said in an email.

The questions then shifted to Stanford, asking whether the university is creating problems or solutions regarding traffic, housing, growth, and the use of alternative transportation, she said.

"Then the survey changed to a 'push-pull' survey whereby the questions are fashioned in such a way as to

propagandize the person being surveyed, and in the process, manipulate their answers,” she said.

According to the email, the survey included questions such as, “Do you think it is fair that Stanford provides the land for four schools now?” and “Do you think it is fair or unfair for Stanford to donate 25 acres of land without compensation?”

The Palo Alto school district has asked Stanford to donate land for a new middle school site. At a public hearing Friday, the Santa Clara County Planning Commission said it would require Stanford to allocate land for a site in the long-range plan. But the commission opted not to rewrite the plan, as environmental groups and commission member Terry Trumbull had called for.