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EDITORIAL The opinion of the Mercury News

Stanford vs. hikers

What are university's motives? Its plan for the Dish is vague

STANFORD Shopping Center draws more people, the stadium generates more enthusiasm, and Hoover Tower is a more visible landmark. But among Stanford lands, its foothills, particularly the area known as the Dish, evoke deep devotion among hikers, joggers, dog owners and conservationists.

Its 20 miles of accessible, meandering trails offer spectacular views of the Bay Area. No one keeps count, but the university's foothills that stretch southwest of Junipero Serra Boulevard, roughly between Alpine and Page Mill roads, are visited by thousands of people weekly.

The university has set off heated debate with plans to protect and to build in the foothills. Stanford has decided to restrict access to the Dish -- named for the microwave dish perched on a hilltop -- and is seeking to locate the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching on a 20-acre foothills parcel.

It's encouraging that the university finally has drawn up a policy to protect natural resources at the Dish. It's disappointing, especially for a university rich with expertise and resources, that the plan is thin on detail and documentation.

Without comprehensive analysis, the plan lacks authority and leads to suspicion of the university's motives.

For instance, Stanford announced it will prohibit picnics and evening access, close down all trails, and ban dogs from the Dish, one of few pet-accessible open space areas. Hikers will be confined to a four-mile fire road.

Those measures are necessary to restore native vegetation and protect several rare species, the university reasons.

Yet cattle grazing, which also disrupts the natural ecosystem, will continue.

Without doubt, restoring what nature intended is worth a major initiative. But the university's plan contains no time line, no discussion of specific problems and possible solutions, and no alternatives.

At a time when it should be courting public opinion, the university has instead taken the offensive. It has reminded the public repeatedly that hiking on university lands is a privilege that may be revoked at any time.

In restricting access, the university argues that it needs to protect three precarious species, the California tiger salamander, the red-legged frog and the steelhead trout.

In fact, it is its own development ambitions that hastened the plan to protect the Dish, which is home to all three species.

Because the university wants to build faculty housing on a field where the salamanders summer, an alternative habitat must be found. That habitat is around the Dish area, where several experimental ponds have been built. Biologists hope to lure the amphibians to those new digs, thus abandoning their traditional winter home in Lake Lagunita -- reachable only by life-risking dashes across Junipero Serra Boulevard and Campus Drive.

The proposed new home of the Carnegie Foundation also is in tiger salamander habitat. The county has begun review of environmental reports for the project.

Although in the foothills, the site already houses two other think tanks, and complies with current land-use plans. Carnegie wants an attractive, secluded setting, which the university will rent for \$1 per year.

Building in a sensitive area has its costs. The county ought to require what its staff and state and federal biologists recommend: that Carnegie and Stanford dedicate a permanent, 4.5-acre conservation easement elsewhere in the foothills for additional salamander habitat.

This summer the county will take up Stanford's plan for the next decade of building. Carnegie qualifies for approval on the site proposed for it. But to prevent further academic sprawl outside the core campus, the county needs to take its staff's advice and draw a greenline at Junipero Serra Boulevard.

Zoning the vast foothill holdings as "academic reserve and open space," a designation the university wants to continue, is no guarantee of permanent protection of open space.