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Simitian presses Stanford for details

By Andria Strickley

Santa Clara County Supervisor Joe Simitian wants more details from Stanford about its plans for open space, saying the proposal the university released last week lacks "clarity and substance."

Simitian, in a letter to Stanford President Gerhard Casper, warned that if the university doesn't flesh out its plan by Nov. 15, the process for approving a General Use Permit to allow expansion on campus could be delayed past the fall of 2000.

"Simply put, the draft documents lack the clarity and substance essential to timely processing," said Simitian.

Before Casper announced last week he would be stepping down as president in August, he called Simitian to tell him of his plans, according to Simitian. During that conversation, Casper said he was hoping the university would receive its permit on a timely basis.

Because of that conversation, Simitian said he wanted to tell Casper that unless the county receives more information from Stanford, the permit could be delayed past the fall of 2000.

A meeting is planned for 6:30 tonight at Cubberley Community Center, 4000 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, where the public can speak out on Stanford's draft plan.

The meeting will likely attract those who feel Stanford should promise to protect the foothills longer than the 10-year commitment in the plan.

The Committee for Green Foothills wants Santa Clara County to rewrite Stanford's long-range plan -- a document the committee said ignores the community's wish that the university preserve its open space.

Denice Dade of the Committee for Green Foothills said at a meeting tonight on Stanford's 10-year "community plan," her group will call on the county to take over writing the document, a draft of which was released Sept. 20.

Dade said the draft plan is inconsistent and vague and doesn't address noise and safety considerations, as required by state law.

"It's so vague and so confusing, it's not clear what Stanford's requesting," Dade said.

Dade said as an example of the plan's inconsistency, the summary brochure released with the document divides Stanford's undeveloped land into two areas -- one for teaching and research and one for open space. But the plan itself doesn't clearly differentiate between the two, she said.

Only a draft

Larry Horton, Stanford's director of community relations, emphasized the plan is only a draft, and said many of its details will be fleshed out during the series of public meetings to be held on the document.

"We always knew there was going to be a great more detail required," he said.

Horton said it is the county's decision whether to rewrite the plan. But he said the university has received

a number of positive comments about the document. Horton said the plan does preserve 99 percent of its open space for the next 10 years.

"We are going to keep our new academic facilities in our core campus," he said.

But Dade said the plan doesn't actually establish a barrier for academic growth, leaving the foothills unprotected.

New conservation group

The Committee for Green Foothills will be joined in its call for open space preservation by the newly-formed Stanford Open Space Alliance. Peter Drekmeier of the alliance said the group formed in response to the release of the Stanford plan. Drekmeier said the group -- which consists of students, faculty, staff and area residents -- plans on petitioning the Stanford board of trustees to give the university's open space permanent protection.

"If the decision were really up to the Stanford community, we would have those foothills preserved," he said.

Stanford will also hear tonight from the Palo Alto school district, which has asked for the university to set aside land for a new middle school.

School board President Don Way said the district will likely ask the county to require Stanford to set aside land both for a new middle school -- and a new elementary school. Way said the housing Stanford is proposing in the plan is much more than the district had expected, and will likely force the district to open a new elementary school.

Horton last night attended a school board meeting to hear from the board on the plight of its overcrowded schools. He told the board Stanford has not ruled out finding space for a new middle school on the campus. But he said the university must meet its own needs of providing housing for its students.

Supervisor Simitian, in his letter to President Casper, said the county planning staff has identified three issues that "must be addressed if the process is to move forward in a timely manner." They are:

- The plan must meet the legal requirements of California law. For instance, the county contends Stanford's draft doesn't address safety, flooding or seismic issues.
- The plan needs to contain enough detail to permit an environmental analysis as required by state law.
- "The plan must contain substance and detail sufficient to communicate a clear understanding of the plan's long range vision; an ad hoc approach will no longer suffice," Simitian said in his letter.

"Fortunately, it is still possible to correct these deficiencies and maintain the initial timeframe if Stanford is prepared to make the necessary effort," Simitian wrote.