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EDITORIAL

“Trust us,” Stanford says
Development plan ignores the community's overriding message on open space

Stanford University officials spent the summer appearing to listen to community advice on how to develop the campus in the next decade.

Now they have produced a plan that reads as if the summer never happened.

Stanford has ambitious and admirable plans for growth in the core campus. But it's just not getting the message about the rest of its 8,000 acres that have come to be viewed as a community heritage.

The overriding desire of the community was for the university to permanently preserve the rolling hills that stretch from Junipero Serra Boulevard toward Interstate 280.

In exchange for a commitment to protect the land southwest of Junipero Serra, the university could get a freer hand to develop on its core campus. That, at least was an unstated premise when Santa Clara County supervisors directed Stanford to draw up a development plan.

Instead, the university's draft plan, released Monday, clings to a current category, “academic reserve,” for that area. In that way, the university preserves not open space, but the flexibility to regard all land as potentially available for academic uses.

Stanford is unwilling to commit itself to the kind of exchange that is routine for major landowners -- open space in return for intensive development elsewhere.

Some parts of the university's plan are admirable. In its core campus, the university proposes building more than 2 million square feet in academic buildings and housing. Among the plans are a new basketball arena, a performing arts center and stadium renovations.

Stanford plans to build up to 2,000 housing units for single students, 350 apartments for families and 430 units for faculty and staff.

Those are impressive numbers, but they're maximums in the plan and they should be minimums, given the regional housing shortage. Further, Stanford should designate what types of housing it plans for various campus neighborhoods, to give residents some certainty about what will happen around them.

In housing, as in the plan as a whole, Stanford has an aversion to limiting its options -- but that's what a development plan does.

Stanford could have placed certain areas off limits, as the community and the county planning commission recommended. Instead, it hedges.

Rather than specify sensitive habitat, it proposes wider creek setbacks. Instead of permanently protecting the Dish, a popular hiking area, it talks about “low-intensity academic use.” Instead of offering an anxious community peace of mind about long-term plans, one of the largest private landowners in the county says, “Trust us.” Ignoring the advice of neighbors does not inspire trust.

Stanford's best interests don't necessarily coincide with the community's best interests. If Stanford refuses to come up with a plan that accommodates some community desires, county planners and ultimately

county supervisors can impose one.