

San Jose Mercury News
December 6, 1999

EDITORIAL

Stanford as steward: University's expansion plan is huge; it must be subject to the same land protection rules as any other proposal

Stanford University is poised to launch its biggest building boom since its founding a century ago.

Flush with foundation grants, the university proposes to build 2 million square feet of academic buildings, and an equal amount of housing. Stanford has submitted to Santa Clara County a 10-year building plan that would expand the university's physical facilities by about one-third.

Those are huge numbers, even for one of the biggest private employers and private landowners in the county. Growth-weary Peninsulans have persuaded the county to intensify its traditionally lax control over the university's development, for the first time requiring a specific community plan.

The scale of the plan has sparked surprisingly few objections from the community. That's in part because people recognize that a thriving Stanford benefits the broader community. And it's in part because the university has proposed to help right the jobs-housing imbalance. It will build 3,000 units for grad students, post-graduates, medical residents, faculty and staff.

While some refinement is necessary, Stanford's plan is admirable on many fronts. And, for the county government, which regulates land use, it is a huge step forward.

After an embarrassing misstep -- in submitting a vague and incomplete draft that was roundly criticized -- Stanford has put forth a new version that is a good start. Now it's the county's turn to transform the Stanford Community Plan into a genuine planning document that fills in the outline of the future.

Beyond debate now is the right of the county to regulate Stanford. Yes, Stanford has been a reasonably good steward of its land, is a big landowner and has an important academic mission. None of that puts it above the law. The university is also a member of the community, and should be subject to the community's rules.

Santa Clara County has protected its hillsides through strict zoning for two decades. When hillside development is permitted, it is standard to require that 90 percent of a parcel be dedicated as permanent open space. Even outside the hills, the dedication of open space is often required to offset the impact of development.

Given the scope of Stanford's proposals, the requirement to permanently preserve open space -- whether through dedication, zoning or an easement -- is reasonable.

The county needs to put teeth into the university's proposed academic growth boundary. Much of the land Stanford has termed "academic reserve" is not developable anyway, because it includes endangered species habitat, riparian corridors, viewsheds, or other sensitive land. Here again, Stanford is not alone. Eight cities in Santa Clara County -- nearly all that border the hills -- have established strict urban growth boundaries that set limits for at least 20 years.

Restricting sprawl doesn't limit growth. The university itself has just demonstrated, with its stunning new science and engineering quadrangle that replaces five sprawling cinderblock buildings, that it can add square footage, improve campus aesthetics and add open space with creative design and planning.

Other areas of the Stanford plan need refinement before environmental studies are performed. It makes

sense to:

- Link the pace of academic construction, which would add 2,200 students and staff, to housing growth.
- Require affordable housing for staff. Stanford employees include janitors, cafeteria workers and nurses aides, as well as professors and administrators. All of them need places to live.
- Set up measures to monitor and reduce traffic.
- Examine Stanford's plans outside the county as well. Only about half of Stanford's 8,180 acres are under Santa Clara County jurisdiction. The rest, including Stanford Shopping Center, Stanford Research Park and medical offices, are in four cities and unincorporated San Mateo County.
- Refine zoning for Stanford land. With more specificity, Tresidder Union, the golf course and wooded hills with think tanks wouldn't all be lumped together under "academic campus."

A concrete, enforceable plan will give both Stanford and the community certainty and should ease tensions with neighbors. University officials seem taken aback by the unwillingness of some in the community to trust them. Perhaps they should examine the contrast between what they say and what they do.

While pledging to protect the hills, Stanford proposes a 21,000-square-foot building in a secluded hillside spot for the Carnegie Foundation. While setting a growth boundary, Stanford proposes two sites for a middle school in the greenbelt. While saying its trails are open to the public, the university wants to ban nearby parking for the popular Dish hiking area.

Stanford's mantra has been that it needs flexibility to maintain its academic pre-eminence. No one disputes the university's right to manage its lands for its own benefit. That's the desire of all property owners. But it is reasonable and responsible to offset the permanent effects of development, and to plan far into the future. That is the county's challenge now.

FOLLOWUP: Santa Clara County will hold a public hearing on the Stanford Community Plan and application for a general use permit at 7 p.m. Thursday in the Palo Alto City Council chambers, 250 Hamilton Ave.