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STANFORD: County wants open space restrictions  
Planning staff alternative would offer greater protection

by Don Kazak

The Stanford Open Space Alliance, an advocacy group, recently printed bumper stickers saying "Save the Foothills." The Santa Clara County planning staff apparently agrees.

In a sweeping recommendation released Wednesday, county planning staff is proposing that Stanford be prohibited from building almost anything west of Junipero Serra Boulevard, a recommendation that sharply contrasts with the university's desire to retain future planning flexibility for its lands.

Stanford officials, in preparing their application for a new, 10-year campus use permit and community plan, responded to community criticism by offering to use Junipero Serra Boulevard as an academic growth boundary, except for the portion of the golf course west of Junipero Serra.

And while Stanford says relatively little will be built on the other side of Junipero Serra, the university's plan was sharply criticized by many for not offering greater protection of the foothills.

The Palo Alto City Council suggested no foothills development for at least 25 years, while environmental groups have suggested a permanent open space designation for the foothills.

The county planning staff doesn't go quite that far, but comes close, in a recommendation likely to make Stanford officials unhappy.

"We considered our (proposal) very carefully and think we submitted a very good plan," said Larry Horton, Stanford's director of government and community relations. He added that Stanford will reply more fully to the county staff recommendations at the Jan. 25 Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors meeting, when the university's proposed community plan will be discussed.

The planning staff is recommending that the academic growth boundary run the length of Junipero Serra Boulevard behind the campus--including the golf course--and that the golf course itself be designated as campus open space. That would mean a county General Plan amendment would be necessary if Stanford wants to build anything on what is now the golf course.

For the balance of the the Stanford foothills in Santa Clara County--a portion is also in San Mateo County--the planning staff is recommending that "only utilities, conservation activities and field studies and their associated facilities and structures would be permitted."

Those recommendations could have more permanence, if adopted, than the life of the 10-year general use permit Stanford is applying for because they would be part of the community plan which, in turn, becomes part of the county's General Plan.

"We would like to keep (the community plan) in place after the general use permit expires," said Sarah Jones, a county planner.

The proposed open space policies are in sharp conflict with Stanford's desire to retain planning flexibility for the future, which is why the foothills are designated as "academic reserve." That's also why the university has never dedicated any of its foothills as permanent open space, including the 1,190-acre Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve, which is in San Mateo County.

All told, Stanford owns more than 8,000 acres, about half of which are in Santa Clara County.

"They're doing the right thing," Denice Dade of the Committee for Green Foothills said of the county planning staff recommendations.

Dade said the academic growth boundary proposed for Junipero Serra Boulevard should be made permanent, and also suggested the county require an ultimate growth limit for the campus, a concept advanced by both the Palo Alto and Menlo Park city councils.

"Defining the ultimate vision of what Stanford is going to look like is important," Dade said.