

Palo Alto Weekly
January 28, 2000

STANFORD: Stanford plan is in county's hands
Campus development plan gets final public airing before July

By Don Kazak

Stanford has articulated its vision for the next 10 years, a vision applauded by a great many people. But it's clear that the university's proposed 10-year development plan is now a county process, and that Santa Clara County officials will have the final say.

Supervisor Joe Simitian stressed this week he hadn't decided what should be in the plan, but emphasized the end result will have to be a county, rather than a Stanford, plan.

Stanford's plan "must be a county plan reflecting the county's perspective and interests," Simitian said Tuesday night at a special meeting of the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors. "As it is presently written, the ... plan is predicated on the university's mission, rather than the public interest."

The public meetings about Stanford's development plans are over for now, with a draft environmental impact report due in June. A final decision on the detail of the plans is expected by the end of the year.

Fifty-seven people had a last chance, for now, to speak their minds about the plans at the Tuesday night meeting.

Stanford's plans to build about 3,000 additional units of housing have won widespread praise, and its need to add about 2 million square feet of academic buildings has also won support--although some are alarmed at the rate at which the campus is growing. Most of attention, however, has focused on Stanford's foothills and how much they should be protected from future development.

Environmental groups, including the Committee for Green Foothills, want permanent protection for the foothills. The Palo Alto City Council is on record as saying 25 years would be desirable.

And Stanford has said it will only build up to 20,000 square feet of buildings in one area west of Junipero Serra Boulevard over the next 10 years.

The county planning staff has drafted an alternative to Stanford's proposal that would greatly reduce the potential for any foothills development.

And, from remarks made by Simitian at the meeting, it seems clear that greater planning control over the Stanford foothills is the direction the county is heading in.

While prefacing his remarks by stating his suggestions shouldn't be construed that "a particular course of action or direction is the right one," Simitian applauded the county staff alternative and said other options should also be considered. Those options include open space dedication--something Stanford is adamantly opposed to--conservation easements, a development agreement, or clustered development.

After Simitian's remarks, the other four members of the county board all thanked him for his efforts and more or less expressed agreement with him.

During the meeting, Stanford's academic mission was stressed by its officials and supporters.

"Stanford's objective for its land use is simple," said Stanford Provost John Hennessy. "We wish to use our

land so that Stanford can continue to be a leading university in both research and teaching ... We are not proposing a vast expansion of our activities."

And Stanford's primary need right now is for additional housing.

Stanford's need for housing was supported by several faculty members and graduate students, who said that high housing prices in the Palo Alto area are affecting the university's ability to recruit the top faculty and graduate students it needs.

The demand for campus housing by graduate students has increased over the last several years. Chris Stromberg, a member of the Graduate Student Council, said that 699 graduate students were turned away from graduate student housing in 1997, 725 in 1998, and 1,071 last year. Stanford can house about half of its 7,500 graduate students, and will be able to house 70 percent if its proposed additional graduate student housing is built.

Much of the attention, meanwhile, has focused on the university's prized foothills.

The Committee for Green Foothills--in a proposal endorsed by the Sierra Club and Bay Area Action--has recommended a permanent boundary for urban development along Junipero Serra Boulevard and "long term open space dedication," a position similar to that of the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District.

But Stanford officials say little development is planned for the foothills.

"I think that Stanford has demonstrated that it has been a good steward of the land it occupies," said Burton Richter, former director of the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center and a Nobel laureate.

"Education trumps open space in the long run," said Palo Alto's Elsie Begle. "Stanford should not be handcuffed into permanent open space."

But the Committee for Green Foothills, among others, has suggested that the county determine the ultimate build-out for the university. "Stanford needs to think of sustainability, not perpetual growth," said Lynn Stewart of the Stanford Open Space Alliance.

The county board will reconvene its discussions, probably in October, while the county Planning Commission will begin its deliberations over the plan and its environmental impact report in July.

Some optimism remains that the end result will satisfy both Stanford and its critics.

"I believe we're capable of crafting a Community Plan and a general use permit which provides both flexibility and accountability, which allows a great university to stay great, without compromising the quality of life for people in the surrounding communities," Simitian said. "It's a challenge, but I think it's one we can meet and master."

That sentiment was also expressed by Stanford. "I'm optimistic that (by) working together we can ensure a bright future for the university and the community," said Susan Orr, a member of the Stanford University Board of Trustees.