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Our Town: About those hills
By Don Kazak

There has been some back-and-forth in the press recently about Stanford's foothills and what the university wants--or doesn't want--to do with them. It all started when members of the Stanford Open Space Alliance delivered to the university's board of trustees a letter signed by 233 alumni. The letter basically asked Stanford to dedicate the foothills as permanent open space or, short of dedication, to make a 99-year commitment not to develop them.

Stanford President Gerhard issued a statement in reply, welcoming the opinions of alumni but taking issue with open space proponents who, he said, had distorted Stanford's position by claiming the university is planning to develop the Dish area.

Peter Drekmeier of the Stanford Open Space Alliance said he wasn't certain whom Casper was referring to but that his group hadn't made such comments.

All of that also spawned some letters to the editor--from Drekmeier, former Stanford President Richard Lyman and several others.

The foothills are a touchy issue for everyone.

Drekmeier and Denice Dade of the Committee for Green Foothills want a stronger commitment to protect the foothills than Stanford has been willing to make. They are also closely watching everything being said. Dade has examined what she calls "Stanford's PR campaign" and takes the university to task for what may be shadings of the truth.

The Palo Alto and Menlo Park city councils have weighed in, too, requesting greater protection for the hills than Stanford has provided in its draft community plan, which is now before Santa Clara County planners.

Stanford officials and supporters, for their part, are sometimes peeved that the university's century-long stewardship of the hills is all but ignored by university watchers and critics.

In the end, what the city councils, Stanford board of trustees and 233 alumni want or think may not matter, except as advice or suggestions. It's all a county deal.

As Santa Clara County Supervisor Joe Simitian made clear in a January statement, the 10-year development plan ultimately approved by the county will be a county, not university, plan.

Simitian didn't come to any conclusions in January, but he was listening to options and recommendations, which are being examined in the draft environmental impact report now being prepared.

The draft EIR will be released to the public June 23. But a more important date to circle is Aug. 14. That's when the county planning staff will release its recommendations for Stanford's 10-year plan.

Discussing the foothills in January, Simitian said there is a range of options to evaluate. "I think it would be helpful to consider the potential for open space dedication, the granting of conservation easements, the transfer of development rights, the use of a development agreement, clustered development, or some combination of those tools, to protect the foothills," Simitian said.

Stanford officials probably look forward to any of those options as much as they look forward to a root

canal.

Stanford has always tried to retain as much planning flexibility as possible and is loathe to do anything that would limit its options.

But the university may have to live with some new restrictions.

While the Stanford Open Space Alliance and others have called for dedication of the foothills as open space, Stanford officials say they can't do that: The university's founding grant by Leland and Jane Stanford, they say, reserves the land for academic purposes.

"To permanently designate any lands for any other purpose (than academic) would be contrary to the university's founding grant," Casper said in his April 10 statement.

But the grant is not as extensive as Casper's statement might suggest. The grant applies only to the former Palo Alto Stock Farm deeded by the Stanfords to the university—about 6,000 of the university's 8,000 acres. The balance of the university lands, including much of the foothills, was bought after the founding grant.

So the university in fact can dedicate at least part of the foothills, those areas not restricted by the founding grant, as open space. That's not something the university is ever likely to do, but it's also different from saying it can't.