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STANFORD: Salamanders could affect building plans  
University is creating new foothills habitat for shy amphibian

by Don Kazak

The California tiger salamander, an 8-inch amphibian with pale yellow spots that lives happily under Stanford's watchful eye, may soon be breeding in the foothills if the university's plan works out. The amphibians have already caused the traditional Big Game bonfires to become just a memory because they were interfering with the salamanders' prime breeding habitat--Lake Lagunita.

Now Stanford wants to build a habitat for humans near the lake, which means a new salamander home would be created on the other side of Junipero Serra Boulevard.

And, to make the foothills plan work, the university will have to build a small tunnel for the salamanders to safely get from the hills to the lake area and back again. Now, the slow-moving amphibians are often run over by cars on Junipero Serra Boulevard.

An overdue environmental impact report on the proposed 21,000-square-foot Carnegie Foundation building in the hills will focus largely on the salamander as well, according to a county planner. The EIR is due soon, maybe later this week.

The salamander, *Ambystoma californiese*, is legally special. It is now classified by California as a "species of special concern" and is a candidate species to be listed as "threatened" under the federal Endangered Species Act, one rung below "endangered species."

But any classification under federal or state law means that care must be taken to protect the amphibian's habitat from harm.

The university is currently working with a "management zone" for the salamanders under a 1998 agreement between the university, Santa Clara County, the state Department of Fish and Game and the federal Fish and Wildlife Service.

A new agreement is now being negotiated, according to Larry Horton, Stanford's director of government and community relations. "We are proposing to expand the zone and move

it," Horton said.

Stanford has already put in new ponds in the hills to make the area salamander-friendly, and is planning the tunnel under Junipera Serra Boulevard. Such tunnels have been used with success to protect a similar species of salamander in Massachusetts.

As a makeshift barrier, Stanford has installed some plastic piping near the road to block the salamanders, who can't crawl over it. The salamanders generally try to cross the road to get back to the lake after the first heavy rain of the fall or winter. Stopped in their tracks by the barrier, the salamanders congregate at the pipe until they are carried safely across the road by students.

The salamander is already affecting people who hike or jog in the Dish area. Because of the new habitat being created, Stanford plans to restrict hills visitors to paved paths in the Dish area beginning Sept. 1, and will ban all dogs.

Tiger salamanders are indigenous to the coastal areas of California. Besides the Peninsula, they are also found in the Santa Barbara area, said Peter Drekmeier of the Stanford Open Space Alliance.

"It's great that Stanford wants to create new habitat for the salamander, but they shouldn't remove a proven one (at Lake Lagunita) to do it," Drekmeier said.

Denice Dade of the Committee for Green Foothills also applauded the increased salamander habitat, but thinks the planning should have been part of Stanford's overall community plan now pending before Santa Clara County. "It needs to be public so people know what Stanford is doing," Dade said. "There's no information and no maps."

A big remaining question is whether the tiger salamander could affect the plans to build a Carnegie Foundation building nearby in the hills. Part of that area has been designated a "special conservation area."

"That probably means there are tiger salamanders there," Dade said.

If so, the Endangered Species Act could be used to try to stop the development, Dade said.

Dade and other environmentalists would like Stanford to make a commitment to not build anything west of Junipero Serra Boulevard, the location of the Carnegie Foundation site. But that development is proceeding on the university's current

general use permit, dating back to 1989, and not under the current permit now pending before county officials.

The Aug. 7, 1998 agreement between Stanford, Santa Clara County, the state Department of Fish and Game and the federal Fish and Wildlife Service designates the boundaries of the management zone, which extend from developed campus area below Lake Lagunita up through the lake, across Junipero Serra Boulevard and into the foothills.

The agreement also prohibits certain activities in the management zone and requires a biologist be present when any work is done. While the 1998 agreement lists several projects in the management zone, the Carnegie Foundation project is not included in the list.