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Guest Commentary | East Meadow, UC Santa Cruz: Time and money

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It is now likely that UC Santa Cruz will be digging up the East Meadow, just inside the main entrance to campus, to construct 140 units of family housing and a child care center. For many of us who have opposed construction on the Meadow over the past six years, this outcome is a bitter disappointment. Family housing and child care are, of course, desperately needed. But the rushed, careless decision to build on the Meadow is a sign the university has abandoned the careful construction and site sensitivity that made its campus a world-famous model of environmentally sensitive planning.

In a terrible irony, by stubbornly sticking to this plan in the face of widespread, heartfelt opposition, the university has delayed additional housing for students by at least six years and increased its costs by at least an estimated \$300 million, all of which must be repaid by on-campus students in the form of higher rents. The possibility of offering affordable housing to students has been seriously undermined.

How did we get to this sad result? In 2016, UCSC proposed the biggest housing project it had ever attempted: 3,072 beds on the west side of campus, to be completed by mid-2022. Then, in the summer of 2017, a decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service confronted the project with a choice: protect a threatened species either by cutting the site in half or by negotiating for an environmental mitigation, a process that would have added about six months to the schedule.

Those in charge, inexperienced in these matters, tore up a plan that faced no opposition and launched a new strategy, hastily and secretly devised. It cut the west-side site in half to avoid the delay, increased the proposed building height, and offloaded 5% of the proposed housing into the East Meadow. By planning to build on the Meadow, the university ignored more than 50 years of campus planning guidelines and the unanimous objections of its own Design Advisory Board.

The resulting opposition included many of UCSC's best friends and resulted in multiple lawsuits, petitions, and concerted lobbying by influential alumni, students and community members. The administration could have put this project back on track by negotiating the environmental mitigation, and moving ahead with their original plan for housing on the west side. Instead their decision to save six months has resulted in more than six years of delay. At present, the project's earliest completion date is 2029.

Many have asked us why the university remained so firmly committed to such a flawed plan, with so many unfortunate consequences. We don't know. As our efforts to persuade the administration to change course grew more open and vocal, we were gratified by the outpouring of support and shared concerns, mostly communicated in private, from colleagues across the university, in physical plant and planning, alumni relations and development, and elsewhere in the administration, as well as from alumni and donors. A change of course often seemed tantalizingly close, but it never occurred. Rather than acting flexibly, the university doubled down, always invoking the urgent need for affordable student housing on campus, a need that no one denies.

The present project will be built with borrowed money that must be repaid with interest from student rents over the next 35 years. Such a long term means that finance costs form a large part of total project costs, often 20% or more. If the university had reverted to its original plan early on, it would have done the borrowing when interest rates were extraordinarily low. Now they are much higher. Combined with other escalations, the total cost is estimated to have increased by over \$300 million.

What is clear is that this project, intended to benefit students, has been mismanaged to their detriment. When the bulldozers enter the Meadow, they will be digging in a structure of debt that students will subsidize for decades. The damage to the UCSC campus, with its long tradition of environmental stewardship and sensitivity to its site, will be permanent.

This Guest Commentary was co authored by Chris Connery, James Clifford, Gail Hershatter, Karen Bassi and Paul Schoellhamer. Their group can be viewed at eastmeadowaction.org.