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Citizens protest development plans

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Posted: 3/23/09

About 200 concerned citizens gathered at the UNM School of Law on March 15 to tell UNM planning officials how developments to the area will affect their neighborhood.

Neighbors for Green Space organized the event to discuss the University's plans to develop North Campus. The group spearheaded rallies against development of the North Golf Course last year.

In the UNMH Master Plan, UNM officials plan to expand UNM Hospital and the campus transit system.

Head Architect Dale Dekker, Director of Facilities Planning Mary Kenney and Vice President of Institutional Support Services Steven Beffort were at the meeting to represent the University and collect community input.

Area residents said they disapprove of the plan because it will increase traffic in the area.

Each neighborhood association in attendance gave a short presentation to express concerns.

"We are worried about hard-surface runoff from development," said Courtney Lawton, secretary of the Santa Barbara/Martineztown Neighborhood Association. "Increased traffic will make our neighborhood virtually unlivable."

Lawton said she and her neighbors have their own plans for improving the area and that UNM is sinking their sector development plans.

"This is our neighborhood. We decide what it looks like. We decide what it is used for," she said. "And the University does not have the right to make us their thoroughfare. We want input with the planning, and we want concerns not just addressed but resolved before you move forward on this."

The proposed plan is a long-term project that could take up to 20 years to complete. UNM proposes building a 400-bed acute-care hospital and an adult psychiatric facility.

According to a slide presentation of the plan, the adult psychiatric hospital would be on the west side of Domenici Hall, away from the neighborhood near the North Golf Course.

"This site will be accessed off of Camino de Salud from the west, eliminating the daily visits through the neighborhood of psychiatric patients," according to the presentation.

The plans also include a parking structure and the extension of Mountain Road to Tucker Avenue to alleviate traffic on Lomas Boulevard.

Documents from the presentation state that planners "do not expect significant negative impact to the neighborhoods to the west" to come from this change.

Elizabeth Matthews, who also lives in the area, said the University is not communicating enough with the surrounding community.

"We have to force them to ask us what we think, and then they do not listen to us," she said.

Graduate student Danny Hernandez said the University has not been open about development plans. He said officials only reach out to the community when construction has already begun.

"What the University has to face is a long track record and long memories of people who have been dealing with this for years," Hernandez said.

Beffort said University officials have made it a priority to get input from the community before breaking ground.

"Mr. Dekker can attest that when he received the charge to do this project, one of the specific parts was to engage the neighborhoods," he said.

Beffort said there are several ways community members can get involved, such as a monthly campus-development advisory meeting.

"This meeting is designed to get input on a regular monthly basis on the process, as we go through the planning of projects for the University," he said.

Community members argued that this process is not enough.

"It's failing," said Jon Spar, who lives near campus. "Your process is failing, and you can see that right here."

The University committed to addressing some of the community's concerns by responding to the questions asked at the meeting on the UNM Institutional Support Services Web site, Frem.unm.edu/iss.

Community members and officials agreed that the meeting was successful in identifying problems, but Beffort said he could not make promises on specific complaints.

"I would be lying if I said, 'We are going to do everything you've asked us to do.' We have a responsibility to the University to move the process forward and make it the best we think we can make it for the University," Beffort said.

UNM officials' presentation on the plan is available at Frem.unm.edu/pcd/MasterPln_Plans.shtml.