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Housing Plan Moves Ahead

*Retirement village near golf course may
displace planned Court of Appeals building*

By Martin Salazar
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The University of New Mexico is forging ahead with plans for a retirement village near its North Golf Course, a move that could displace a planned Court of Appeals building near the law school.

“We’re very interested in working with the community, but we are going to try to move ahead with a retirement community, maintaining the golf course,” Jamie Koch, president of the UNM regents, said this week.

Koch said as part of the project, he would like the university to find a new site for the planned state Court of Appeals building now slated to be built near the UNM Law School. A groundbreaking had been projected for early 2008.

Hundreds took part in a walk in February to advocate for preservation of the golf course, which is bordered on three sides by the University of New Mexico Hospital, the law school and the Domenici Center health sciences building.

Regents previously had signed off on the courthouse location.

“I think we need to get out of the deal on the courthouse,” Koch said, stressing that he was speaking for himself and not the full board. He said UNM could find other land for the courthouse.

Appeals Court Judge Michael Bustamante said he didn’t know how a change in the location might affect the project.

“We have a Board of Regents resolution in place that they passed last year ... allowing or giving us the space that we’re planning for,” Bustamante said. “That’s still in place, and we’re currently working on the form of lease.”

Plans for the retirement community are still in the early stages. A proposal calls for a continuing life care community that would have condos, independent living apartments and assisted living facilities. The housing would be geared toward retired UNM faculty, staff and alumni.

Plans also include revamping the golf course so it needs less water and keeping the trails. Koch said the golf course now uses too much water – 70 million gallons a year.

He said the university would enter into a long-term lease with a developer, generating steady revenue for UNM. Early estimates indicate the project could generate anywhere from \$2 million to \$3 million a year, he said.

Koch said the money could be used for UNM construction projects.

He added that the retirement village would likely raise the value of homes in the area.

Sara Koplik, president of the North Campus Neighborhood Association, said she met recently with UNM President David Schmidly and other UNM officials. A neighborhood association meeting is slated for 5 p.m. Oct. 28 in room 2401 at the UNM Law School. She said Schmidly has also agreed to take part in a town hall meeting on Nov. 4.

She said while she's grateful to the university for talking with the neighborhood, she has major concerns because the area "is beloved by thousands and thousands of people."

Koplik said plans the university shared with her show much of the golf course being eaten up by the retirement community. She said it would go from a full nine-hole course to an executive course, which is more like a practice course.

Koplik also questioned how much water the retirement community would use. And she said she thinks the project would negatively affect home values in the area.

Koch said getting buy-in from the community is important to UNM.

"But on the other hand, there comes a time that you just have to make the hard decision and say we've tried everything we possibly can, and we need to move on ... We hope to work with them as much as we possibly can, but it's not going to stall it."