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McKownville neighbors: Dorms too close for comfort

**Harriman board votes
to support original plan
to build on 3.3-acre site**

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At its Monday, Jan. 10, meeting, the Harriman Research and Technology Development Corporation board of directors rejected a plan to build University at Albany dorms on 11 acres of the Harriman State Office campus.

Instead, the board favors the original plan to give 3.3 acres of state office land to the University at Albany for the purpose of building dorms. In that proposal, the university would use additional land on the southeast corner of the campus, behind University Plaza, to make up for the additional space they would need for the 500-bed dormitory.

Jola Szubielski, a press officer for the Empire State Development Corporation, said the board chose the 3.3-acre plan over the 11-acre plan because it would have less of an impact on future development.

"It [the 3.3-acre plan] has less of an impact on the Harriman redevelopment process, as the 11-acre plan would mean the loss of prime potential development land," said Szubielski. "The board also feels the 11-acre plan would have a significant impact on traffic due to the proposed modification of the ring road."

Don Reeb, president of the McKownville Improvement Association, which represents the neighborhood near the campus, said he was disappointed the board chose to favor the original plan.

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In an e-mail to McKownville Improvement Association members, Reeb said, "There is no good reason to destroy neighborhoods to expand dormitory space when a partially vacant Harriman campus is conjoined to the University campus, beyond the current project."

Szubielski said that while the state office campus does have 140 acres (out of 330 acres) of vacant land available for development, the Harriman Research and Technology Development Corporation has other plans in mind for the land laid out in their 2006 master plan.

"The board is in negotiations with the Columbia Development team currently to develop the first phase of the project, with a focus on technology, [research and development] and/or related office space," said Szubielski in an e-mail.

Reeb, a retired professor of economics at the university, said he is concerned about the impact of the future expansion of the university's dorms on the neighborhood.

"Roughly 4,000 people live in McKownville. I get calls from time to time asking if the university is going to build in McKownville," said Reeb.

Reeb said he believes that the plan favored by the board on Monday is going to be the first of several new dormitories to be built by the university. He said the university's sports fields, located closer to the McKownville border, are a possible site for future building. McKownville begins

around the Western Avenue entrance to the university and includes parts of the campus.

Karl Luntta, media relations director for the University at Albany, said, "Due to the outcome of the meeting, we will be moving forward with the original plans."

Including the use of state office land, the entire project will encompass approximately 15 acres.

The site is expected to house 500 students, however, Luntta said, "We will likely engineer the site to build an additional 500 beds," meaning the site could eventually house 1,000 students.

Luntta said the concerns of the community have been factored into the planning of the expansion.

"We have been meeting with the neighbors and community at hearings for the last year," said Luntta.

He said in response to residents' concerns, new construction will include the addition of a berm and 100-foot tree line to shield neighbors from the dorms. He also said the university is considering relocating Campus Road to provide an additional buffer between the dorms and the neighbors.

Despite the efforts by the university to make the dorms more community-friendly, Reeb said he would have preferred the entire project be built on the state office campus.

"It would make a lot of people around here a lot more comfortable," said Reeb.