

May 22, 2019

Dear Chancellor Christ,

I am writing in response to your letter of April 2 to the CNR community regarding next steps at the Oxford Tract (OT). As you know, the prospect of housing development on OT has been the subject of extensive discussions within CNR and the plant research community over the past two years. The Oxford Tract Planning Committee (OTPC) report from Spring 2018 (and associated documents) provides an essential summary of those discussions.

To solicit feedback on your recent letter, I convened two town hall meetings, one on 4/9/19 with faculty and cooperative extension specialists from the departments of Plant and Microbial Biology and Environmental Science, Policy, and Management, and a second meeting on 4/15/19 open to the entire community, and attended by faculty, students, staff, and local community members. I am writing to provide a summary of these discussions. It is important to state at the outset that the CNR community hosts a diversity of opinions and does not speak with one voice; my purpose in this letter is to capture that range of opinion and possible paths forward towards shared goals.

The need to address our housing situation is keenly felt by all who live and work in Berkeley, perhaps most of all by students struggling to find and afford suitable housing as they pursue their studies. We recognize that an OT project could contribute towards meeting that need, though it would only be a small part of any long-term solution. Students in our community are also deeply concerned about the affordability of campus housing and express a strong desire to participate in the broader discussion about housing and basic needs.

On the other hand, the construction of student housing on a portion of OT represents a net loss of valuable space used for research, teaching, and public outreach, the core mission of the University. Because OT is the only research and teaching facility identified in the campus housing plan, there are some in the community who fear that this represents a retreat from the long-term commitment to the land-grant mission of the University, and CNR in particular. As you know, questions have been raised about the legal status of the parcel, and its dedication to agricultural purposes. I would like to reiterate the request from the OTPC for an unambiguous determination of the legal status of the property, and the designated purposes for which it was acquired by the University in 1923.

Based on the input I have received (summarized in greater detail below), **I write to request as a critical first step in the planning process a community engagement dialog and design study that explores a wide range of joint solutions to our needs**, beyond those put forward in the OTPC. Specifically, we need to fully understand the potential site designs that could provide housing, upgraded plant and insect growth facilities, and some amount of open field space, enhancing the integration of research, teaching, and student experience. I know there are many in the CNR community who would welcome the opportunity to contribute to a creative design process. Additionally, it is critical that we fully engage professional greenhouse and laboratory design and construction firms in this process, as developers focused on housing may not have the experience required, especially for research quality facilities.

Greenhouse facilities

The plant biology research community, in CNR and across campus, is critically reliant on the OT greenhouses for propagation and plant growth space. Many leading plant biology programs at peer universities have larger and more modern growth facilities, adjacent or attached to core academic buildings. The potential benefit to Berkeley's plant biology research programs that could accrue from the OT development will be the construction of new, modernized, and equal size or larger greenhouse facilities on the current parcel, or closer to academic buildings. Many research faculty cautiously embrace the project on this basis.

However, there is widespread concern that promises of new and improved facilities are not always honored, when financial resources and construction timelines are tight. In addition, continuity of functional research facilities is essential; new facilities must be completed and fully functional before existing facilities are demolished. As the project moves forward, it is essential that faculty not feel any lack of confidence that they can continue current research, design new projects, and submit proposals for sponsored projects on the basis of facility availability. Thank you for affirming in your letter that CNR faculty will be involved in all stages of project design and planning. Any significant decisions that are made without input from our community will quickly engender a lack of trust that these needs will be fully embraced.

Agricultural field

In contrast to the benefits of new greenhouse facilities, the loss of the open field growing space, and displacement of activities to Gill Tract or other locations, provokes strong opposition from several faculty members and a large number of students and community members. The field is used for several classes (e.g., ESPM 117 and 118) and there is a significant sector of our community dedicated to urban agriculture, agroecology, and related topics that are supported by the OT field. The commitment to preservation of the Student Organic Garden is greatly valued, but does not allay concerns raised by the loss of the larger field space, much of which is used for instructional activities as well as research. Our urban agriculture classes also contribute food grown in the field to the Basic Needs program, and students feel that the loss of a visible commitment to urban agriculture is strongly at odds with the University's efforts to address student food security, equity and inclusion. While research and teaching activities can be transferred to Gill Tract, the impact will be severe—especially for teaching—due to the distance from campus. The OTPC proposed several alternative locations near campus for urban agricultural teaching activities. If these become the only available options, we will continue to seek full support from campus to secure and develop such a site.

The feasibility of moving the field research program to another site was addressed in part by the OTPC report. Full replacement of the lost facilities requires addition of approximately one acre of growing space. At Gill Tract, this could be in the southern portion that is currently unused, which will require investments in soil preparation, enhanced security, community relations, transportation services, and additional facilities to house equipment. CNR will also request a long-term commitment from campus for continued research use at Gill Tract, to ensure that activities are not displaced again in a future round of demand for construction sites.

Student housing

The final point of discussion in our meetings addressed pluses and minuses of the housing itself. Many students express strong opinions that the planned dormitories will not be truly affordable. In addition, the positive impacts of any one project on the housing market (i.e. increase in supply) might be slight, while the negative impacts on our teaching mission are immediate and tangible. I hope that the administration will continue to engage closely with student advisory groups, as concerns about affordability will apply to other projects as well.

On the other hand, some community members, including members of the CNR advisory board who are experienced in real estate development, see great potential for a new dormitory in our sector of campus to contribute positively to our community. The project should be a model of sustainable, zero-carbon housing, embracing the latest building techniques and the use of advanced wood products. Dedicated housing for CNR students, space for student groups dedicated to sustainability and environment, integration of discovery experiences taking advantage of the proximity of housing and the plant facilities, and rooftop greenhouses or green roofs available for urban agriculture, could provide long-term benefits that enhance the 'small-college' feeling that CNR fosters and prides itself on.

Thank you for inviting this opportunity for feedback in response to your recent letter. I look forward to opportunities for continued discussion in the near future.

Sincerely,



David Ackerly