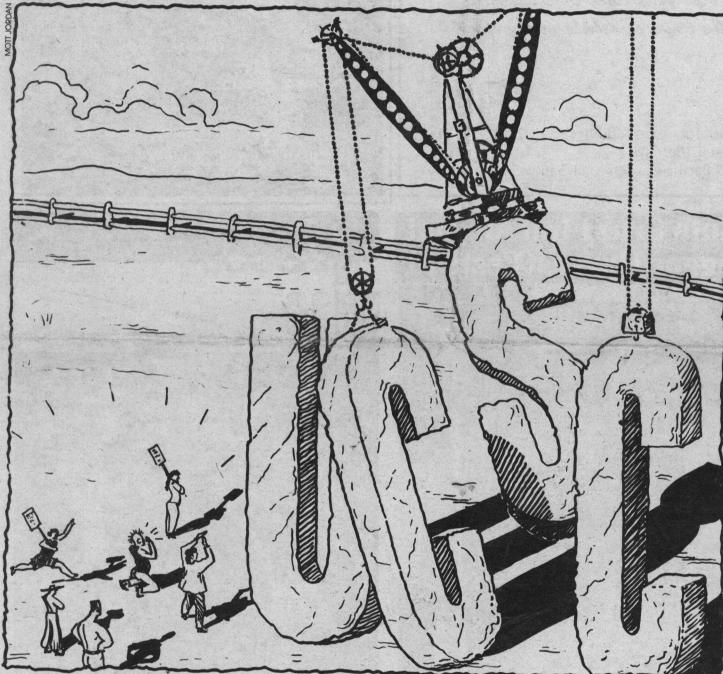# FOUR BIG
UCSC GROWTH IS NOT WHAT

MOTT JORDAN

By Jeff Ringold

The university is Godzilla, ready to crush our helpless hamlet beneath its massive weight. Or, the city is a pesky horsefly that distracts our noble champions of knowledge as they try to build a great hall of learning in the hills above our chosen town. These are the competing pictures we usually see drawn around the ongoing dispute between UCSC and the City of Santa Cruz over campus growth.

That the pictures are too easy is obvious: too easy for the city, too easy for the university, and too easy for all of us who live here. But this is how they continue to be drawn, largely because of adherence to some well-loved myths on both sides of the debate—myths that obscure the real issues and glaze over our need for self-reflection and change. Confronting the real issues could bring newfound life and direction

to both campus and town, but to do this we first have to slay what have quickly become *the four favorite myths about university growth.*

Myth #1: Bigger is Better

Faculty want their programs to expand, and a new chancellor wants to leave his mark on the campus curriculum. This is natural enough, and with some programs has legitimate academic benefits. But the logic that links size to prestige to quality is faulty logic. At a certain point, bigger is almost always worse.

Ask students at UCSC now and they'll tell you that many classes are overcrowded or unavailable, faculty are more distant, and the academic environment is generally less nurturing and stimulating, and more chaotic than it was before the campus's era of joyful growth. And it's not just disgruntled students who make these com-

plaints: Every study I've ever seen says unequivocally that student achievement, involvement, and even altruism and social responsibility are better in smaller colleges. Smaller colleges retain a sense of community, collegiality and social purpose that large "multiversities" can't possibly provide.

While it's true that some research activities require more expensive equipment and larger teams of researchers than tiny colleges can support, no one seems to be able to find any justification at all for the giant academic supermarkets that have come on the scene in recent decades. One *Science* magazine article sounds a locally familiar theme when it suggests the creation of small colleges of several hundred students within larger universities so that teaching and research can both be well fulfilled. But the article is typical of most when it draws the

following conclusion about overall size: "It is difficult to see," say University of Washington medical professors Jonathan Gallant and John Prothero, "what further advantages, other than the possibility of United Nations membership, can possibly accrue to a university population above 10,000 souls."

It's a myth that bigger universities are better: Many faculty, most students and the published literature on the subject all bear this out. Completely reducing the growth issue to a town-gown conflict just glazes over this fact.

Myth #2: Bigger is Fairer

The issue for most people, however, isn't about growth per se. It's about the University of California's constitutional commitment to educate the top 12½ percent of California's high school seniors. This in the eyes of many is a public trust that we can't forsake, and that if we do forsake it will weigh heaviest on poor students and

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ethnic minorities. Pulling up the drawbridge now would be elitist and socially irresponsible.

This is a caring and thoughtful argument—certainly more thoughtful than "bigger is better." But it ignores the elitism that's actually inherent in growing too large and fast. I don't just mean the attempt to defer the whole issue to faraway powers (UC's president and board of regents)—though that's certainly elitist enough. And I'll put aside some practical alternatives that richly deserve to be considered, like construction of a new UC campus or campuses, summer quarter enrollment, a junior year student sabbatical, or a simple waiting list for UC—all viable options that would keep access open and at the same time ease the impact on the local campus and community.

What I do want to question is the way that overgrowth makes our public universities into vast, impersonal diploma factories so that only those who can afford to pay tuition at a private college can get a personalized, high-quality education (the kind UCSC has up until now prided itself on). Californians should have access to their public university, but they should also receive an education worth receiving there.

And they should also be able to live in healthy, affordable communities. One of the great iron-

MYTHS
IT'S CRACKED UP TO BE

ies of the "bigger is fairer" argument is that here in Santa Cruz, poor and middle-income people already suffer at the hands of unbridled university growth. Rents soar, the housing market is filled with students who can join together to pay large sums for a place to live, and the prospect of rapid growth pushes up the cost of living across the board.

This gentrification spiral could well mean that Santa Cruz may even among UCSC students soon become an affordable place to live for only the wealthiest. This isn't a matter of mapwork and "demographic statistics" so dear to the hearts of bureaucrats. It's real people trying to live in a real community where the cost of living and quality of life are markedly affected by what the university does.

I don't think the conflict is between Santa Cruz and the rest of California at all, but between a centralized bureaucracy which claims to represent "the people," and a local community of people representing themselves. No doubt the concerns of Santa Cruzans seem small-minded and provincial to those who see their mission as a much loftier, more transcendent one. But our concerns go well beyond some narrow self-interest with water or sewage or traffic.

When we fight for this small place, we're fighting for all small places—all places of personal, human scale, which can be known with intimacy and belonging and fidelity. We're fighting for a level of association that brings depth and charm to life—something no state or corporate agency can ever do. And we are fighting for a form of political association that is inherently *nonelitist*, because people can participate directly in the decisions that affect their lives rather than entrusting them to elites in Washington, D.C., Sacramento or Berkeley.

When growth advocates make social responsiblity their battle cry, they pit class and racial interests against those of community and environment as if opposing reckless growth makes a person not only elitist but racist as well. They would have us believe that unbridled growth can solve questions of distributive justice by simply making the pie bigger. But the ones who stand to benefit most from "damn the environment, damn the community, full speed ahead"-style growth are far more likely wealthy white developers than disadvantaged Latinos and blacks.

Besides, the real social and educational question isn't just broader access to roles of power anyway, but also how those roles are structured (what *kind* of pie). When the university pushes for growth, it champions a whole ethos of institutional bigness and bureaucratic control which, far from challenging rigid hierarchical structures, supports and maintains them.

This is true not only of the push for growth, but also of the kind of growth the university seems to be pushing. The two programs UCSC's administration mentions as the harbingers of its socially enlightened future—"Management" and "High-tech Engineering"—hardly seem to embody any profound commitment to social transformation. If the university really cares about nonelitist, socially responsible education, why doesn't it start a management program that teaches specifically democratic or consensual

forms of management rather than the usual strategies for greasing the wheels of state and corporate hierarchy?

Or with engineering, why not bring together people from various disciplines to consider the score of social, political and economic questions raised by the computerization of society, instead of jumping on the high-tech bandwagon without any concern at all with where the bandwagon's going? Or more pointedly still, why not include a "low-tech" component as well, with training in community-based, ecologically minded technologies such as solar, wind and wave power, or conservation and reclamation technology? Such a program could help not only to place ethical relevance at the fore of the campus's science curriculum but also to make some solutions to local problems more affordable than they would be on a purely commercial basis.

UCSC could choose to become a leader in fields like these. But it must first decide what kind of university it wants to be. Either it will continue to espouse the usual canon of liberal social values while in practice bolstering systems of unequal power and privilege, or it will put its programs where its mouth is and offer students a chance to manifest critical, compassionate social values as they earn a living.

Myth #3: University Growth Is the Problem

The city is to some extent making the university the scapegoat for all the basic problems that beset any community struggling with growth. "If only the University would stop growing, then Santa Cruz could stay beautiful and we wouldn't have to do anything to change our lifestyle or ways of thinking. Let's just stop growth, and we'll start stopping it with the university."

The problem with this attitude, of course, is that it shirks our own responsibility. It may be true, as growth control advocates argue, that there is in urban communities, like all ecological communities, a population "carrying capacity" beyond which the health and quality of life begin inevitably to decline. But this is really a half-truth, because it tends to conceal the social and technological roots of the problem.

If we want to talk about the impact of growth on housing, sewage, traffic, open space and so on, we have to talk seriously about how we do things and how to find better ways of doing them. If we take our social policies, technics and daily behavior as givens and point the finger of blame at the university, we might as well end the discussion right now and consign Santa Cruz to the fate of San Josisco (that concrete slab which runs from San Jose to Marin sans distinguishable places along the way).

What we need now is a community planning process which helps make the transition to sustainable technics and forms of social policy—policies geared toward the long-term health of our infrastructure and bioregion. The city planning process sometimes looks like that game on TV, where they spin more and more plates on top of tall sticks and then run around madly trying to keep them all spinning. We "manage" one crisis and then another, always seeming to fall behind the flow of events. What's actually

taking place is a series of fundamental shifts in social and ecological patterns: massive population increase, environmental constraints manifesting as pollution and depletion of resources, and transition from a mass economy to an information one, or more generally from limitless growth and consumption to economic contraction or steady-state. From the vantage point of these transitions, even the loss of community funding to Proposition 13 or to excessive military spending appears as a smaller ripple in the larger wake.

Rather than arguing over stupid dualisms (either we grow or we don't, either we build

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a road through our most beautiful stretch of greenbelt or we overrun our neighborhoods with traffic, etc.), we need to chart a new course out of the impasse. We can start by making a commitment to ecologically sound social structures and technologies like solar, wind and wave energy, pesticide-free agriculture, alternative waste disposal (e.g., composting toilets), viable public transportation, mixed-use construction integrating workplace and home, community-based rather than corporate economics, and sharing of time and resources together rather than reliance on "experts" and retreat into private wonderlands of "success."

The usual bureaucratic argument against making these shifts—that they're not realistic or practical—simply doesn't cut it anymore. We are in crisis, and the least realistic thing would be to keep doing things the way we've always done them. We can avoid making these changes for some time but there is a cost to doing so, which is that we will make our change by crash-landing rather than grace or foresight.

To make these alternatives work, however, means that local officials have to stick their necks out and make the difficult decisions to do some things and not others (like invest in transportation alternatives rather than catering endlessly to the automobile). It also means that they have to go beyond simply opposing the university, and begin redirecting the discussion toward creative, cooperative alternatives. By focusing on their own capacity to grow and change, the university and the city could do some really exciting things together that could

benefit both sides. But it's not just the university and the city that are responsible here—which brings us to the last of our four myths.

Myth #4: Why Don't They Do Something?

More an attitude than a mythical conviction, this is the favorite plea of irate citizens everywhere. It's an attitude exacerbated by the defensive posture of local officials when confronted by new ideas (afraid they'll been seen as flaky and lose the next election), and by university officials who seem utterly immune to input from anyone (even among their own faculty) who isn't well placed in the university hierarchy. But it is in the end our attitude alone—we who live here and complain as most of us habitually do.

We drive alone to work but want clean air, open space and a quick commute; we want wonderful city services but don't want to pay for them; we want thriving art and culture in Santa Cruz but pay for the big names elsewhere; we want a healthy local economy but send our money to the big chains or streaming over the hill; we want to protect our beautiful environment but demand of it an infinite supply of water or comfort or convenience; we oppose oil drilling off our coast but do nothing to curb our reliance on fossil fuels; we claim to care for those less fortunate, but buy into lifestyles of glamour and status, and so on.

The point isn't to judge or condemn ourselves or each other for driving too much, or driving a shiny BMW, or washing our shiny BMW with a running hose when we get home. It's not about being "more politically correct than thou," but about seeing how we're creating the situations that we condemn, and realizing that we have alternatives.

I sometimes think our present water shortage is actually a blessing, because it helps bring our attention to where things (like water, food and energy) come from, and where things (like garbage and sewage) go to. Perhaps it could even help teach us to be more grateful for what we do have—enough water to drink, enough food to eat, green hills, blue ocean, and (if we really get carried away and profound social upheaval ensues) each other.

We in Santa Cruz live in one of the most beautiful and abundant communities on the face of the earth. Local government, the university and community members all deserve acknowledgment for what they contribute. But if these are difficult times for local communities in California, which they are, and if these are times of questioning and self-reflection for higher education in California—which they should be—then it seems like a particularly bad time to make each other into convenient scapegoats. Because beyond all the superficial PR, authentic kinds of cooperation between the city, UCSC and local residents may be the key to making either campus or town livable and lovable in the years ahead.   •

Jeff Ringold, a UCSC alumnus, is a local freelance writer and community organizer. The opinions in this essay are his own and do not necessarily reflect the editorial views of The Sun.