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High-tech center arouses concern

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SANTA CRUZ — If there is a petition effort under way to force UCSC to go through the local planning process on its tentative plans to build a high-tech research and manufacturing center, no one is taking credit for it.

Rumors have been circulating about the petition and there appears to be growing community distrust of the project at City Council hearings. However, no one has come forward to announce the petition drive.

City councilmembers were told at a neighborhood meeting Thursday by one audience member that county Supervisor Gary Patton was to lead the initiative move.

Patton said this morning he's heard the same rumor, but he isn't spearheading a petition.

He said he's monitoring the process at the university and finds it unusual that UCSC is doing an environmental impact study prior to having a designed project.

Patton and his aide Andy Schiffrin say they're happy an EIR is being done, but it appears the school is using the impact study to design the project which is putting the cart before the horse, as planner say.

Councilman Michael Rotkin said he's been hearing of the petition and he thinks it may be a good idea.

The county elections office says there's been no official notification of a petition.

Rotkin said computer companies have made it clear they're not interested in being classrooms, but they are interested in land on which to build labs and assembly lines.

The university announced in April it was considering building a research center on UCSC lands.

The state university system is short of money and it looked like a good way to raise \$1 million a year.

A financial study said it could only raise that amount if the research center was 60 percent manufacturing and would grow to a size of about 2,000 employees.

The university said it would only build a facility the community could accept and has held a couple of public hearings.

The questions grew sharp, and without a firm project university administrators ran out of answers. They cancelled a third community hearing.

Since then, the community's distrust has grown, according to measurements at City Council hearings.

Councilwoman Mardi Wormhoudt said the project should come under local control as the university's exemption is meant to protect its academic freedom and not allow it to engage in "capitalistic enterprise" outside local control.

"I'm getting a lot of calls on this issue. People are reacting reasonably as there isn't a project yet. But, even so, people are very frustrated by the fact the university says 'we will incorporate community opinion,' yet there is no structure to do that at this point," she says.

She says the exemption of universities, which are state agencies, from local planning was to guarantee "academic freedom" but that is not what is at stake here.

Patton says he agrees and that university campuses should have to answer to local planning control when it "is acting as a private developer and not just carrying out its functions as a university."

A member of the audience said the university shouldn't have let the Porter Sesnon property go so cheaply.

It is believed the lease on that property went to a private developer for from \$1 million to \$1.5 million.

The developer is in negotiations with the state parks department to sell back part of the lease for \$4 million.

"The university implied they would not proceed unless they had community consensus that it was a good idea," Wormhoudt says.