

# FAIRBANKS Daily News - Miner

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Established in 1903

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## Give public more chance to comment on UAF lands

Because the people of Fairbanks have a compelling interest in how University of Alaska lands are used in our community, the Board of Regents would be premature to authorize lease negotiations for farm land along Geist Road.

The public has had only a few days to learn about the interest of Carrs Foodland and Wal-Mart in building new stores there. We have talked to some people who are excited about the idea and others who are dismayed. What they have in common are many questions about the proposal. The university needs to answer those questions, and then provide an adequate forum to gather and consider public opinion before asking the Board of Regents to authorize lease negotiations.

The proposed development would be a major change in that part of our community. Since it is under consideration by a government agency, it differs from the process a private land owner would have to use. A private land owner would need to comply with zoning and permitting requirements. A public land owner such as the university should also consult with the people of the area and take our views into consideration.

We are sympathetic with the university's interest in generating revenue from its land. Gov. Walter Hickel has been urging the university to "manage its ranch"—in other words, to use its land to generate revenue so it will be less dependent on its state general fund appropriation. We have applauded the Fairbanks campus for the "northernMOMENTUM" fund-raising campaign it initiated recently.

Still, converting lands which are part of the main campus to a commercial use is a major change not just for the university but also for the community.

The people of Fairbanks need to know more about whether such use would comply with the university's 1915 land grant, which reserved and dedicated the land "as a site for agricultural college and school of mines"; how the proposed use would affect the ecology of the area; what we could expect in increased vehicle traffic; how much revenue might be raised and how it would be used; how the land is being used now and what alternate uses might be possible in the future.

Since the administration has brought this proposal to the Board of Regents, the board will take public testimony on it Friday morning. That will be a good start. But the time is not convenient for many people, nor has the community had enough time to respond.

If lease negotiations with specific entrepreneurs are authorized before the public has been consulted about the basic idea of leasing this land for commercial development, the cart will have come before the horse.

It could well be that in the end, this proposed development will prove to be good for both the community and the university. But we don't think the Board of Regents will have adequate public comment on hand Friday to make that decision. We suggest the regents postpone the decision to enter into lease negotiations, provide more information to the public, and conduct a more thorough process to find out what Fairbanksans think. Then the board could act in the best interest of both the university and its constituents.



## UAF land plans will have major impact

Who has the right to make planning decisions which strongly affect the quality of life in a community? Is it done by a designated community planning process? Or will it be inflicted on our community by a corporate decision in which Fairbanks citizens have no voice?

This is the crux of the current controversial proposal to lease UAF agricultural lands for construction of a huge shopping complex, including a second Carrs Foodland and a new enterprise in our town—Wal-Mart—plus the accompanying parking lots, and a host of subsidiary commercial enterprises. Twenty five acres—approximately 1,300 feet along Geist Road, and 1,000 feet deep, paralleling the Parks Highway—would be included.

The impact of this large development at this particular location will be felt far beyond its borders. It will gut a vital portion of agricultural research lands containing ongoing experiments unique at such a far northern location. The agricultural experiment station and adjoining farming lands were integral to the creation of the University of Alaska.

This proposed development might cause UAF to lose the entire agricultural program, which could be moved into the Palmer vicinity, thus effectively transferring another major UAF department to the Anchorage area. The present Botanical Gardens at the farm are a major tourist attraction for visitors to Fairbanks.



Cella  
Hunter

The problem of drainage of snow melt or rain runoff from such an extensive paved-over area has not been addressed in any of the current planning documents, to my knowledge. Such runoff would contain many contaminants harmful to both agricultural products and the waterfowl which use these wetlands.

In addition, the increased traffic will have a series of unfortunate repercussions. This particular intersection has a deadly record already; adding the huge traffic load for this merchandising complex will compound current problems. University personnel headed to work would be particularly affected.

Ice fog caused by the parking lots and the operation of additional hundreds of autos in this particular area will undoubtedly create problems even at moderately low winter temperatures. Hundreds of children are transported through this area by bus to existing schools—Woodriver, West Valley, and University Park, and their safety will be at risk because of lessened visibility.

I am not aware that any responsible authorities, either the UAF planning engineers, the DOWL Engineering firm doing the site planning for the developers, the Corps of Engineers, DEC or EPA have dealt with this intrusion into wetlands which offer haven to thousands of migratory waterfowl each spring, or with the problems of building on permafrost here.

UAF has already experienced great difficulties with broken plumbing lines and cracking at their community college facility farther east along Geist Road. What tests have been carried out to determine the depth of permafrost on this building site?

It appears from correspondence directed to Ron Tanner, regional traffic safety engineer for DOT/PF by DOWL Engineering that this project has been in the works for a number of months. Let us hope that this isn't one of those "done deals" in which the agency and the developer and the UAF administration will claim they are already too far along to call it off now.

DOT/PF has a major highway restructuring in the works for Geist Road over the next six to 10 years. Since Geist Road is part of the Johansen Expressway complex, it is slated to become a 60 mph highway, with limited access. The developers of the new shopping center are protesting this DOT/PF decision, because they don't want to have to use a frontage road along Geist as access for their stores.

It should be obvious that the out-

sits backing this new shopping center have a lot of clout, and will be exerting their influence in many areas as they pursue their aims. Ordinary citizens could become mere pawns in this game.

People who drive the Parks Highway to work each day are alarmed at the changes this construction would create in the pastoral view they now enjoy across the UAF agricultural fields to the university strung along the ridge. This site for the UAF campus was carefully chosen by Dr. Ernest Bunnell, founder of the university, because of the spectacular view it affords from that ridge.

We realize that the Alaska state university system is facing budget cuts, which make such high paying leases very attractive, but the negatives associated with this development require exhaustive investigations before any lease is finalized. Perhaps an Environmental Impact Statement should be required, which would bring out all the pros and cons involved.

Citizens of Fairbanks will have a chance to comment on this proposal to the board of regents, which will have the final decision-making authority. The regents are meeting at the UAF June 3 and 4 this week, and have scheduled public hearings on this proposal for Friday, June 4, at 9 a.m. in the Wood Center on campus.

Cella Hunter has been active in the Alaska conservation movement since 1960.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR