

The Register-Guard

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ORI pursuing alternate site for new building

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Published: **Saturday, Jul 2, 2011 05:01AM**

Opponents of a planned building along the Willamette riverfront in Eugene are on the verge of a significant victory as the University of Oregon seeks permission to move the project to a less controversial site.

Next week, the UO will ask the state Board of Higher Education for permission to lease the new site to a development company for construction of a \$17 million building for the Oregon Research Institute and Educational Policy Improvement Center. The site is set back from the riverfront and is between two existing buildings in the UO's Riverfront Research Park.

If the lease is approved, developer Trammell Crow plans to begin construction of the 80,000-square-foot, four-story building in late August, with completion expected by October 2012.

The pending deal would put to rest a dispute that has simmered for nearly two years and also end Eugene-based ORI's roughly decade-long search for a new headquarters.

For almost two years, a group of UO students and faculty and the community group Connecting Eugene have fought the university over plans to put the ORI building on a site at the western end of the park, next to the Eugene Water & Electric Board equipment yard. It would have been the first building in the 67-acre research park to be built along the riverfront on what is now a vacant lot.

The UO plan for development right next to the river prompted a strong backlash from people concerned about riverfront development and who believed the project violated the 20-year-old master plan for the UO-owned research park. They urged the university to consider other locations, and when officials declined they filed a series of appeals and procedural challenges. Earlier this year, UO President Richard Lariviere stepped in, urging Trammell Crow to study the site that's set back from the river and amid existing development at the eastern end of the park.

Allen Hancock, a Connecting Eugene member, said he's happy the effort paid off.

“This is a win-win outcome as far as we can tell,” he said Friday. “This is good news for the community at large.”

It now appears that the conditional use permit that allows the UO to build along the riverfront will expire before any buildings go up. The university won an extension of the 20-year-old permit last year but is not expected to pursue any new projects along the river.

That means opponents of the riverfront project likely will get what they have been pushing for all along, a revision of the research park’s master plan that includes significant community involvement. Hancock said it shows that citizen involvement can affect the outcome of local decisions.

“It’s gratifying to know that with a lot of persistence, research and the support of many, many other community members we can really have an effect on democracy and our local civic issues,” he said. “I’m hopeful that this situation might serve as an example to some other issues our community faces, such as Civic Stadium, for example.”

Although the university will lose the chance to make a significant expansion into the riverfront portion of the research park, officials say they’re happy to clear the various legal hurdles from the project’s path and see construction begin. Diane Wiley, the park director, said the main goal all along was having a site that meets the tenants’ needs.

“I’m pleased that it looks like we’ve got a site that’s going to accommodate them,” she said. “At this point there’s a path forward, and no one is more happy about that than ORI and EPIC. I think it’s a good solution.”

Dan Hoechlin, facilities manager for ORI, agreed. He said the priority was always a site that allows the research center to maintain its close ties to scientists at the UO, and the new location fills that bill.

“It’s going to work fine for us,” he said. “It’s been a long battle, but we see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

But the move will cost the university. Under the new deal, Trammell Crow will pay the university \$1.47 million for a 55-year ground lease. But the company will be able to take a credit of up to \$550,000 against that amount to cover the cost of the building redesign, site evaluation and parking improvements.

Wiley said the building will look much the same as was planned at the previous site with only minor modifications. Some parking will be built on the new site, but the developer also will build parking in a vacant lot across Millrace Drive and will reconfigure parking in an adjoining lot.

The parking is all on property south of the railroad tracks that bisect the research park.

No time line has been established for revising the master plan for the rest of the research park, but efforts are expected to begin in the coming academic year. Members of the UO student government have allocated \$56,000 toward the cost of a campuswide planning and community involvement effort aimed at determining the future of the riverfront strip.

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