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ORI's research park site gets OK

The state approves moving the building back from the river, settling a controversy

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PORTLAND — The University of Oregon's Riverfront Research Park will get its first significant new building in more than two decades after a state board on Friday approved a new site for the project.

The state Board of Higher Education unanimously accepted a plan to put the \$17 million, 80,000-square-foot building on a lot between two existing buildings away from the Willamette River. The move cleared the way for construction to begin later this summer, possibly next month.

The vote marked a quiet end to an almost two-year controversy over the building, which the university originally wanted to put in a riverfront section of the 67-acre research park. It would have been the first building in the park to border the river, but the site drew intense criticism from a group of UO students and faculty and from community members.

Several appeals and legal challenges blocked the project as opponents urged the university and UO President Richard Lariviere to consider a different site. Two months ago Lariviere did just that, asking developers to look at a different location that avoids the siting controversy.

The new site is along Millrace Drive between two existing buildings that house a number of high-tech companies and university spin-offs. The location is south of the railroad tracks that run through the research park and will leave the area between the tracks and the river undeveloped except for some soccer fields and a bike path.

The building will provide a new home for the Oregon Research Institute and the Education Policy Improvement Center, two businesses with strong ties to UO research programs. It is being built by developer Trammell Crow, which will operate and lease out space in the building.

Connecting Eugene, the group formed to block construction on the riverfront site, applauded the higher education board's approval of the site change.

"The alternate site on Millrace Drive provides a win-win solution to a long-standing local controversy," it said in a statement following the board vote. "ORI will soon start construction on a new building next to other facilities in the Riverfront Research Park and options for the future of our riverfront will remain open."

The new site isn't as large as the original location, but planners were able to make it work by moving some parking to an area across Millrace Drive.

But the changes will take a big cut out of the university's payment for the site. The 55-year ground lease would pay the UO \$1.47 million, but the developer will be allowed to deduct up to \$550,000 from that to cover the cost of evaluating the site, making design changes and building a parking lot.

With the site issue resolved, the university has indicated that it will now begin a revision of the research park's master plan before proposing any new buildings along the riverfront. Opponents of the original site had insisted that such a revision, with strong public involvement, take place before the riverfront area is developed.

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