Details about numbers of parking spaces and the size of setbacks needed for an office building may determine whether a years-long dispute over the proposed Oregon Research Institute building ends amicably.

The question building experts are evaluating is whether the proposed 80,000-square-foot ORI building, parking spaces and landscaping can be accommodated on two parcels totaling 3.6 acres that are set far back from the Willamette River, as opposed to the long-proposed site of 4.3 acres right alongside the river.

University of Oregon President Richard Lariviere announced Monday that the UO is asking ORI and its developer, Trammell Crow Co., to evaluate the smaller site.

However, it’s still unclear whether the smaller property, at 1700 Millrace Drive, could accommodate the ORI project.

Trammell Crow said it will be weeks before it concludes its investigations and will be able to say whether the ORI project can be placed on the two smaller parcels.

Those two smaller parcels are on either side of Millrace Drive, about a half-mile southeast of the 4.3-acre site at 855 Riverfront Parkway.

“We just don’t know yet,” said Steve Wells, senior managing director of Trammell Crow Portland office. “We are just wading into this.”

However, Wells added his team already has determined that parking will be a major hurdle. The ORI project, as planned for the Riverfront Parkway parcel, had 180 parking spaces.

At this point, Wells said he believes the proposed four-story ORI building, as
At this point, Wells said he believes the proposed four-story ORI building, as designed for the Riverfront Parkway site, could easily fit onto the bigger of the two Millrace Drive parcels, which is 2.4 acres.

But there’s not enough land on that parcel for all the needed parking, so an additional parking lot would need to be built on the second Millrace Drive parcel, of 1.2 acres, across the street. And, he said, an existing parking lot next to that land would need to be reconfigured.

Wells said building a parking garage is not being considered as a solution.

Parking garages are extremely expensive in comparison to surface parking.

Both the Millrace Drive parcels and the Riverfront Parkway parcel are owned by the state and are in the UO’s Riverfront Research Park.

Diane Wiley, director of the research park, said the proposed Millrace Drive site will be a tight fit for the ORI building. Land use rules would require the building to be set back both from Millrace Drive in front of the site and the Millrace waterway that runs behind the parcel.

“There are some challenges. We are truly at the beginning phase of looking at this. It will take us several weeks to work with designers and really test the site for feasibility,” Wiley said.

The Riverfront Parkway site is a simpler proposition from the design point of view.

It’s a large rectangular parcel with ample room for the building, parking and landscaping.

At the Riverfront Parkway site, ORI’s plans call for about a quarter of the 4.3 acres to be taken up with landscaping that would buffer the building from the Willamette River. Assuming that amount of screening isn’t needed at the Millrace Drive site, that reduces the acreage ORI needs.

A broad coalition of critics have spent many months attacking the UO administration over the Riverfront Parkway site, saying it’s inappropriate to put such a large development so close to the river.

This week they said they’re tentatively hopeful about the proposed Millrace Drive site.

But if they’re happy, Lariviere hasn’t heard from many of them.

“Has gotten exactly one e-mail on the topic,” Lariviere said this week.
“I’ve gotten exactly one e-mail on the topic,” Lariviere said this week.

“That e-mail said congratulations, nice compromise.”

Lariviere said the e-mail wasn’t from a name he recognized or even descriptive enough to reveal how the sender felt about the original location planned for ORI.

Lariviere said it was the community’s vocal opposition to Riverfront Parkway location that led him and his staff to push for a review of the alternative site.

Lariviere has instructed Trammell Crow to explore the feasibility of the Millrace Drive site while still moving forward with planning for the Riverfront Parkway site.