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EDITORIAL: Grant UO an extension

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The university seeks more time on research park plan

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The Riverfront Research Park was born in the depths of the 1980s recession, and now some argue that it's time to update the master plan for the park. They're right about the need for an update, but the city of Eugene should first grant the University of Oregon's request for a three-year extension of the plan and the permit that allows construction in the park.

At stake is construction next year of a \$17 million, 80,000-square-foot building on a site across the Willamette River from Alton Baker Park and just east of the Eugene Water & Electric Board property. The planned building, which is being developed by national real estate giant Trammel Crow Co., is intended to serve as the headquarters for Oregon Research Institute, the behavioral research firm with 250 Eugene employees.

UO officials have agreed to build only two buildings during the three-year extension — the ORI headquarters and another building on a now-vacant lot between the two main existing research buildings on Millrace Drive south of the railroad tracks at the east end of the park. The research park's master plan would undergo a comprehensive — and what is certain to be a multiyear — revision before any additional buildings are constructed.

Opponents, including some UO faculty members and students, argue that construction of the buildings would damage the riparian environment and restrict the university's bike-path connections to downtown.

Those are legitimate concerns that have not been ignored by university officials.

The plan for the ORI headquarters building calls for straightening, widening and repaving the current neighboring bike path. Opponents say the proposed building would cut off university access to the river and block future bike paths. But there is plenty of alternative river access, and bicycle transportation improvements should be systematically addressed in a master plan update.

While the university has applied for an extension, it's uncertain an extension is even required. Because the 1989 master plan and permit were appealed to the state Land Use Board of Appeals, the city didn't enter into a final conditional use permit agreement until 1992. University officials say previous interpretations have used the 1992 date as the start of the 20-year plan, and if that proves valid, the permit and master plan would not expire until 2012.

Yet university officials acknowledge the need to update the master plan. Much has changed since the park was born amidst controversy in the 1980s. Then, as now, much of the opposition to the park came from those who feared it would infringe on the environmentally sensitive riverfront. Yet it's important to remember that the site was not previously pristine riverfront. For years much of it had been used for gravel extraction and as a repository for construction debris. The land was zoned heavy industrial when it was acquired by the State System of Higher Education.

For the most part, the university has been a good steward of the site. The original master plan called for developing only half of the park's total of 67 acres, and development has fallen well short of original projections. While initial plans foresaw activities in 21 buildings employing 3,000 people within two decades, there are currently only three buildings that have a combined total of 430 employees — the park's flagship building at 1600 Millrace Drive, a second multistory building at 1800 Millrace Drive, as well as a small nearby incubation center for new companies.

Yet the research park has been a quiet success that has gained momentum in recent years. UO officials say it has had 100 percent occupancy over the last two years and to date has housed a total of 72 companies, including 22 start-ups created by faculty, students or based on UO research.

But it's the rare 20-year-old master plan that doesn't need updating, and the Riverfront Research Park is no exception. An update should incorporate not only riparian protection and transportation concerns, but also lessons from the evolution of university research parks nationwide. At many schools, including the UO, there are increasing collaborations between private companies and university departments, many of which occur in laboratories and buildings on campuses and not in separate research parks.

The city should grant the UO's request for a three-year extension and clear the way for construction of projects that should provide a welcome boost for the university and the local economy, while setting the stage for a thoughtful and thorough update of the Riverfront Research Park master plan.