

Let ORI move ahead

Research park project deserves wider support

The University of Oregon has prevailed in a dispute over planning for its Riverfront Research Park, but the underlying issue can't be settled in hearings and appeals. The university wants a developer to build offices for the Oregon Research Institute on the portion of the research park that lies north of the Southern Pacific railroad tracks, and opponents don't believe a building belongs that close to the Willamette River. What's required is not a technical planning decision, but a wider recognition of the benefits of the ORI project.

Oregon's Land Use Board of Appeals has ruled that a city hearings officer acted properly in deciding that the master plan for the research park doesn't need to be updated until 2012, which means the ORI building can be constructed without a new planning process. LUBA's ruling can be appealed to the state Court of Appeals, but after two strikes, it seems likely that reasserting the argument about the master plan's expiration date would result in a third.

No court or planning panel, however, can persuade opponents that it's a good idea to put an 80,000-square-foot building on property that some believe has vastly greater value as open space connecting the UO to downtown Eugene. Before they will accept the ORI project, opponents will need to come to terms with the

site as it exists today, and as it would be after ORI's building is complete.

No one should wish for the property to remain as it is. It was mined for gravel before the UO acquired it about half a century ago. The university leased the land to the Eugene Water & Electric Board as a storage site for transformers and utility poles. It's surrounded by a chain link fence, which squeezes the riverfront bicycle path between wire on one side and blackberries on the other. Putting a stop to ORI's plans would all but guarantee that the property would remain in this condition for at least two years, and probably longer.

ORI might not be able to wait for a new research park master plan. The institute has obtained a \$5 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to help pay for its \$17 million building. The grant is stimulus money that must be spent within two years. Losing the grant would probably force ORI to start its long search for new quarters all over again.

ORI's plans call for an energy-efficient, low-waste building set 100 feet back from the river. This economically beneficial and environmentally benign project is within reach. It deserves broader support, both because of ORI's importance to the community and because it would be a clear improvement, both aesthetically and in terms of open space, over what's now on the building site.