

American University
Campus Plan Community Task Force Meeting
Tuesday, January 11, 2011
Meeting Notes

Meeting Agenda

Tonight's Task Force discussion focused on the university's proposed timetable to release a draft of the Campus Plan for community review, and on an update of proposed changes to population, housing and new facilities.

A list of these issues and the meeting presentation were distributed electronically to Campus Plan Task Force members before the meeting. All meeting documents are available on the AU Campus Plan Web page at www.american.edu/finance/fas/campus-plan.cfm.

David Taylor, chief of staff for AU President Neil Kerwin, opened the meeting and began a round of introductions.

David reviewed the university's current plan to issue the draft Campus Plan to the community during the week of January 17, 2011. AU plans to make presentations to ANC3D and ANC3E in February and to file with the DC Zoning Commission in March. After the filing, AU will also attend ANC3D and ANC3E meetings in April. Depending on the Zoning Commission's schedule, hearings could begin in May or June, 2011.

Jorge Abud, Assistant Vice President for Facilities, Development and Real Estate, reviewed the Campus Plan objectives as they support the university's Strategic Plan. He reviewed actions that AU has taken since the last Campus Plan Task Force meeting in October, including a number of small meetings with neighbors in Ft. Gaines, Westover/Neighbors for a Livable Community, Tenley, and Embassy Park.

Jorge also outlined several significant changes that the university has made to its plan resulting from meetings with neighbors, and from internal university assessments of housing needs. In order to strike a balance between its needs and those of neighboring residents, AU now plans to (1) reduce its original housing inventory target from 4,900 to 4,100 undergraduate students, and to (2) reduce the total proposed gross floor area from 1,200,000 to 750,000 square feet including the Tenley Campus.

For the proposed East Campus, AU has reduced the number of beds from 860 to 765, reoriented housing to mitigate views, placed a building with first floor academic/administrative functions closest to nearby Westover residences, and re-drew the proposed New Mexico Avenue driveway to keep it at its existing location.

Further, AU removed several residential buildings from the Campus Plan – two proposed for the South Campus, two proposed for the Clark site, the LA Pavilion and the East Quad. One project was added that is the Mary Graydon South Addition.

The proposed Tenley Campus plan calls for the addition of 244,000 square feet integrated with the 60,000 square feet of Capitol Hall. This would also include demolishing Congressional, Federal, Constitution and Dunblane buildings. The new law school would be built on approximately the same footprint of the existing buildings on the Tenley Campus. The university would maintain and enhance the landscape buffers along Warren, 42nd and Yuma streets.

A question about housing on the main campus was asked if the reduction in the overall gross square footage and the removal of several earlier proposed buildings was in response to community requests or university needs. Jorge Abud said it was combination of both of these factors: changes to the South Campus reflected AU's listening to its neighbors while removing the East Quad and the LA Pavilion reflected internal decisions.

In response to questions about the Tenley Campus, Jorge Abud said that about 120,000 square feet of buildings would be demolished, and that the current Washington College of Law was expected to grow from 1,700 students to 2,000 students in the next 10 years.

Jorge reviewed information that the university has assembled about where AU students reside. The findings showed that 62% all of students live in DC, 65% of undergraduate students live in university-provided housing, 80% of the 1,176 undergraduates in Zip Code 20016 live in apartments and 238 undergraduate students live in houses. The review identified 13 undergraduate group houses that have four or more students.

He added that AU is focusing on improving the quality of AU's housing. Currently, 85% are traditional double rooms with bath facilities down the hall. The proposed plan will reduce this number to 60%, and will make the university more competitive in providing the housing new students expect.

He said that AU currently houses 65% of its undergraduate students, and that AU is suggesting that this number decrease to 55%.

A comment was made by Task Force member that the move to lower the percentage of undergraduates on campus is a mistake, and that the university needs to consider adding another residence hall. Jorge responded that the university has changed its goal because the marketplace is meeting students' need. Therefore the university does not need to build as many new residence halls.

A comment was made that the university had previously stated that its goal was to bring students back to live closer to campus, and that goal should not result in fewer beds on campus because that initial priority is good for the school and for the community.

Another Task Force member said that more beds on campus decreases problems in the neighborhood.

Another member urged AU to reconsider the potential site behind the President's Office Building for another residence hall. Additional community members expressed support for this reconsideration as long as the character and site of the President's Office Building is properly protected.

Next, Beth Buffington of Little Diversified Architects described the proposed plans for Nebraska Hall that include an additional 120 beds, a landscape buffer in the back, and no new roof structures. She said it is important to the university that these buildings are sensitive to neighbors and that the design is intended to address concerns about noise, pedestrian safety, traffic and service vehicles, and site issues.

A question was asked whether there could be some slight build up from the sidewalk so that the landscaping would look better and not be trampled. Jorge Abud said the university would look at this idea, but would need to consult with the National Park Service since the first 40 feet of the property belongs to them. A suggestion was also made that the university coordinate with the Department of Homeland Security across Nebraska Avenue.

Turning to the East Campus, opinions were expressed that a number of issues raised by neighbors were not listed on a slide, including parking, landscaping, fences, proximity to the adjacent wall and houses, and the Massachusetts Avenue entry/exit from the East Campus. Beth Buffington said that the design for the East Campus moves the students to the corners as Nebraska and Ward Circle for pedestrian crossings. Concerns were expressed by Westover neighbors that the drawings presented were not to actual scale. David Taylor said that the university will work on improving these materials. Another Westover resident expressed interest in working with AU's landscape architects about the proposed berm and landscaping plans.

In response to a question, Beth Buffington said the placement of a building with administrative functions on the first floor was made to help provide a buffer between East Campus and Westover. Further, the building will have a 14 ft. first floor, 18 ft. second floor plus the roof. She added that buildings one and five will be five stories tall and have residential units on the first floor. Retail is planned for Building 1 and a small section of Building 5. Jorge Abud added that the university will look for retail that will serve the university and the community.

A neighbor requested that AU include a perspective drawing that will show a visual comparison of the proposed buildings and the Methodist Church across New Mexico Avenue.

Another neighbor asked about the use of brick on the East Campus buildings. Beth Buffington said the inclusion of brick tends to create some scale, break down the massing and make the buildings friendlier. Further, brick has a nice residential quality that blends into the neighborhood.

In response to a question, AU said a full set of drawings would be available before the March filing, and they would try to have them before the ANC meetings.

Several questions were asked about parking and AU's parking policy for students once the Nebraska lot becomes the East Campus. Jorge Abud said the university's policy is to charge market rate for parking. One Task Force member asked if AU would consider adding a parking fee for undergraduates as part of their tuition. In similar policies, those without cars could opt out. Jorge Abud said that proposal is not a good one for AU, but that the university is still looking at its options.

The discussion turned to the Tenley Campus and plans for a new Washington College of Law. Robert Bull of the Smith Group, AU's architects for this site, said their firm had worked on 25 law schools around the country, and also has a large practice that involves historic preservation.

He said the plans for the new law school include 300,000 gross square feet including restoration of Capital Hall. Their plan also limits new density on the site to minimize the impact on the existing site. The firm was engaged by the university in November, and has developed an initial site plan that shows the massing. The basic design is to attach the law school building to Capital Hall in a respectful way, coming off the back and wrapping around, using the existing curb cuts. Parking for 400-500 cars will be below grade, and the new loading facility will be similar to the one that exists now.

A comment was made that the management and traffic, along with loading issues will be important to neighbors. A Task Force member asked how traffic could be managed in a way that does not create hazards for existing institutions, noting that several schools and a church are close by. Jorge said that the current Tenley Campus has 500 students and 100 AU employees. The new Campus Plan with the addition of the law school will increase those numbers to include 2,000 law school students and 400 staff and faculty by 2020. Jorge added that the university needs to figure out the best way to manage traffic with the planned access to the parking garage on Nebraska Avenue.

Another comment was made that AU should not minimize traffic concerns about Yuma Street (the "bus street"), and how this might affect Nebraska Avenue. Another comment was made for AU to think about whether it could build fewer parking spaces, because a lot of young people are driving less and using public transportation, bicycles, etc.

Concerns were also raised about AU's plans to raze Dunblane on the Tenley Campus, and whether that meant that AU would come back after this Campus Plan with additional development plans for that area of the campus.

At 9:00 p.m., Don Edwards said the meeting provided an opportunity for everyone to speak in real time, adding that this meeting is not the end of the community discussions about the new Campus Plan. He asked the group if they would like to keep meeting until 9:30 p.m. or adjourn. The consensus was to adjourn the meeting.