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Thursday, May 14, 2009

Students meet with UM officials over East Campus debate

School, critics clash over plan to bulldoze nine acres

by David Hill | Staff Writer



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When Ann Wylie, vice president of administrative affairs at the University of Maryland, College Park, met May 6 with critics of the school's plan to remove nine acres of on-campus forest to make room for its East Campus project, the three students who had led efforts against the plan were noticeably absent.

The university is scheduled to level nine acres of a 22-acre wooded hillock behind Comcast Center to make room for mailing and vehicle maintenance facilities that will be displaced by the \$900 million project, which will bring housing and retail shops to the area on Route 1, across from the campus' main entrance.

Seniors Davey Rogner and Phil Hannam and junior Joanna Calabrese, said they sent a letter voicing their concerns to Wylie on May 1 but never received a response.

The three met with Frank Brewer, the school's associate vice president of facilities management Wednesday.

"It means a lot for the vice president of facilities to spend two-and-a-half hours talking with students," said Rogner. "That's a pretty strong statement."

Students, faculty and environmental groups have criticized the move in recent weeks, calling it contradictory to the university's environmentally-friendly image. On Friday, about 25 students and faculty picketed an on-campus ceremony honoring the school as an arboretum and botanical garden.

University officials said they appointed a committee that carefully considered 12 sites from 2005 to 2007 before choosing the hillock, which they said offered the best combination of cost, proximity to campus, low visibility and minimal environmental impact.

"What we have done is try to balance a number of very difficult issues and come up with an optimum solution," Brewer said.

Critics have argued that the university acted with little to no student or faculty input and should re-open the selection process, which they believe was incomplete and too heavily driven by cost.

"They need to find an alternative to that site ... my suggestion is they find a parking lot on which to build those facilities," said Jack Sullivan, a professor of landscape architecture at the university who attended Friday's protest.

Brewer said the design process that would lead up to eventual bulldozing has not been halted, but that alternatives are being considered in the meanwhile.

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He plans to meet again with the three students and an outside group of environmentalists led by Jim Connolly of the Anacostia Watershed Society, Brewer added.





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