UC Merced's $1 billion expansion up for a vote this week

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MERCED -- A $1 billion expansion plan up for a vote this week would shape the future of the University of California's newest campus, the 6,700-student UC Merced, where classrooms are packed until late at night, clubs meet outdoors and students camp out on the library floor to study.

The 10-year-old Central Valley school, set alongside grazing cows and grasslands near the Sierra Nevada, has seen a sharp uptick in applications from students across the Golden State as the UC system grows increasingly competitive. The 2020 Plan, as it's known, would build the housing, classrooms and research laboratory space needed for the number of students already on campus -- and allow it to grow to 10,000 students over the next five years.
"The next phase of development is critical for our campus," said Domonique Jones, Merced's student body president, a senior from the East Bay city of Hercules. "Just generally, we feel more packed, more overcrowded. It's literally like a growing pain."

UC regents are expected to vote on the plan during a public meeting at UC San Francisco's Mission Bay campus Thursday and Friday, just as they decide whether to add 10,000 more in-state students to its nine undergraduate campuses over the next three years.

The system's more established campuses, such as UC Berkeley and UC Santa Cruz, have severe space constraints and can’t expand as easily, which is one reason Merced's growth is so important, noted Dianne Klein, a spokeswoman for UC President Janet Napolitano.

"We believe strongly in building up this campus and making it the very best research university that it can be," Klein said.

Each spring, the Merced campus becomes a fallback option for thousands of top high school seniors who are guaranteed UC admission because they are in the top 9 percent of their class but who have been rejected from every campus to which they applied.

Last spring, that number was the largest-ever: 12,974.

Less than 2 percent of these students enroll at UC Merced each year, however. And some say that by giving those students only one option -- which very few take -- the University of California is failing to meet the spirit of its admissions guarantee.

Still, the number of high school seniors applying to UC Merced rose by more than 15 percent last year, the biggest increase in the UC system, and the campus -- already crowded -- grew by about 6.5 percent in the fall, further straining housing, parking lots and office spaces for faculty and graduate students.

"You go through all four floors of the library and there is no space, so you just take an area on the floor," Jones said.

Teaching and researching at UC Merced means working "elbow-to-elbow" with your colleagues, said Tom Hothem, associate director of the campus writing program. And while he doesn’t mind the close quarters, he said, Hothem is in the minority.
The office across the hall has 30 teaching-assistants assigned to it, he said.

UC regents have expressed support for the expansion -- along with concerns about the debt that UC would take on to finance it.

The project would be funded with $600 million in UC-issued bonds; $157 million in campus funds generated from such sources as housing, dining and parking; and $386 million in funds from the developer, to be repaid when the building hits key milestones -- "akin to a warranty," as Merced Vice Chancellor Dan Feitelberg put it.

The regents' decision will come two weeks after UC Merced police shot and killed 18-year-old Faisal Mohammad after the freshman stabbed four people, apparently in revenge for being kicked out of a study group. The stabbing victims are all expected to recover.

Supporters of the campus say they don't expect the horrific incident to have a chilling effect on applications.

"What happened on that day could have happened anywhere and unfortunately happened in Merced," said Mike Murphy, a city councilman who is running for mayor.

Jones, the student body president, and Murphy, the mayoral candidate, are among those who plan to travel to San Francisco to lobby for the plan.

"It's a good project," Murphy said, "not just for Merced, but for the UC system and for college students in the state of California."

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