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UC updates city on campus plan

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UC Merced Chancellor Dorothy Leland speaks to the Merced City Council during the study session 'Urban Land Institute Study' in Merced Monday. (8-5-13)

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Smaller footprint, downtown offices envisioned

By RAMONA GIWARGIS — rgiwargis@mercedsunstar.com

MERCED — The Merced City Council on Monday got a glimpse of future plans to expand UC Merced's facilities to meet its goal of enrolling 10,000 students by the year 2020.

Chancellor Dorothy Leland, along with the university's provost, Tom Peterson, presented the council with a vision to develop more buildings using less space — condensing the campus' footprint from a projected 355 acres to 219 to reduce costs.

"We are unable to accommodate the growth of the campus with the current facilities," Leland said. As a result, the campus has spread to off-site locations such as the Promenade and the Mondo Building downtown, she

said.

Leland proposed consolidating some of the university's "scattered" support staff to a single downtown Merced location, reducing travel and public safety costs.

Merced Mayor Stan Thurston said moving the staff downtown would provide a boost to area businesses.

"When it comes to their desire to bring their operations downtown, the city would be supportive of that," Thurston said, following the meeting. "So many of these retail shops would benefit if we had more people in the area. For this city, the UC is the big economic driver of our lifetime."

A tough economic climate and a lack of state funding for development plans halted the campus' expansion, Leland said. But officials sought creative solutions to reduce costs, such as focusing on a smaller footprint and building multi-use buildings in clusters, using one developer.

UC Merced enrolled 5,760 students as of fall 2012; that number is expected to climb to 6,000 students by this fall.

With the growth of the student body, Councilwoman Mary-Michal Rawling asked Leland about increasing the level of UC Merced staff positions.

Leland estimated the university's current staff, excluding the student affairs department, totals about 1,000 people. She predicted that number could double with the university's growth.

The expansion plans, dubbed the "2020 Project," was unanimously approved by the UC Board of Regents in May.

The Hvidt Group's Bill Hvidt detailed the next steps of the plan Monday, including selecting a development consultant to oversee the project. A Request for Proposal was released in May, with more than 130 firms expressing interest, he said.

The team plans to select a consulting firm for the project by the end of this month, Hvidt told the council Monday.

Merced Councilman Noah Lor said the information presented Monday was useful and will allow him to better answer questions from the public regarding UC Merced's growth.

Lor said the plans to expand UC Merced to downtown are particularly exciting.

"I'm looking forward to working with UC Merced to really build our downtown area," Lor said. "It's a very positive thing, and I'm thankful to UC Merced. I appreciate the chancellor's vision and our downtown area will certainly benefit from the expansion plans."

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