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Ten Years Later, UC Merced Development Helping City Out Of Recession

By [KERRY KLEIN \(/PEOPLE/KERRY-KLEIN/\)](/PEOPLE/KERRY-KLEIN/) • MAR 6, 2018

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(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kvpr/files/styles/x_large/public/201803/UCMerced2020_2.jpg)

The \$1.3 billion Merced 2020 Project will more than double the university's footprint. Foundations being poured here will become classrooms, laboratories and office space.

KERRY KLEIN / VALLEY PUBLIC RADIO

Ten years ago, the city of Merced was ground zero for the housing crisis in California. Just a few years before that, the University of California's brand new Merced campus opened outside the city, which arguably drove the overdevelopment that set up the city to fall so hard during the recession. Now, a decade later, the university has invested in the city with a new downtown building—but that's not the only new development happening at UC Merced.

Driving toward the university in eastern Merced County, your first glimpse of campus is likely to be construction cranes towering over rolling hills and grazing cattle. Then, it's half-constructed buildings, some wrapped in plastic. Finally you see the giant hole in the ground with the beginnings of a foundation.

It's all part of a project called Merced 2020 (<https://merced2020.ucmerced.edu/>).

"We're about to see the largest higher education expansion of its type anywhere in North America," says campus spokesman Richard Cummings. "We're building 13 buildings simultaneously."

That includes a dining hall, sports facilities, dorms, laboratories and classrooms. By the time it's finished in 2020, the school will have the capacity to expand from around 8,000 students to 10,000. Its footprint will double to 219 acres. It'll have so many new spaces that not all of them have been claimed. "That's the great thing about this project," Cummings says. "We're adding on to our house, so to speak, and now we're going to decide what rooms different kids are going to be living in."

But Merced 2020 isn't all about space. It's about identity and opportunity, expanding the only UC school in the San Joaquin Valley and underscoring its role as a research institution.



<http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kvpr/files/2018/03/UCMerced20180312-10520>

University Chancellor Dorothy Leland is particularly excited about more lab space. “We’re going to have a new greenhouse and we’re going to be putting in a very special lab that will allow us to do research on disease-causing organisms,” she says. “We’re also going to have a computational center.”

Accessibility is important, too. Leland says the university developed a financing plan for the project that wouldn't scare away the very students it's trying to serve.

“I think we'll have primarily low-income, first generation and underrepresented groups, and that's really the demographic future of California,” she says—as well as the demographic of the current student body.

The project will roll out in three phases. Campus spokesman Richard Cummings points to a 28,000-square-foot dining hall that will open as part of the first delivery in summer 2018.

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Students themselves are excited about future opportunities. Salma Memon is a UC Merced senior and president of the undergraduate students' association. “The swimming pool is a huge one that I know everyone keeps talking about, the rec center is going to be growing,” she says. “All of our academic buildings that are coming online will offer more classes. That also opens up the conversation about which new majors to offer, as well as minors.”





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UC Merced is the newest campus of the University of California system. It opened for classes in 2005, and overdevelopment in an

The university is also settling into its home in the San Joaquin Valley. Although not a part of Merced 2020, a new downtown administrative center is moving hundreds of jobs into the city of Merced. And even though campus is seven miles away, Mayor Mike Murphy says a \$1.3 billion-dollar investment there is a big deal for the entire area. “To put that into perspective, the city’s general fund, the fund we have the most discretion over, is about \$42 million a year,” he says. “So their investment is our entire general fund times 30 years.”

Murphy says that investment has already led to pressure on the city’s housing market. “And so we know that by 2020 we have to have some additional supply of apartments, 1,000 units, just to sort of keep status quo,” he says.

It’s a tall order - and a bit ironic, given what happened 10 years ago. Terry Ruscoe witnessed the housing crash in Merced from his position as owner of Merced Yosemite Realty. “There was a lot of speculation happening in the housing market, a lot of people were exuberant about the new UC being here, so we kind of were unfortunately the poster child of devaluation in property,” he says.

But Ruscoe says renewed development now is a good thing. And excitement about UC Merced is helping the city look toward the future again.



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“We sat there in the doldrums for seven years, then in 2012 when the UC decided on its 2020 project and started moving forward, it really made a significant difference,” he says.

The Merced 2020 project is slated to be finished by the time students arrive on campus in the fall of 2020. As for what comes next, Chancellor Leland says she hopes planning can begin on a new management school.

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