

Ad Hoc Committee on the Site of the Research Park

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The following comprises the final report of the Ad Hoc Committee  
May 2, 2009

## **Establishment**

The committee was established under the following resolution by the Faculty Senate:

BE IT RESOLVED that an Ad Hoc Committee of the Faculty Senate comprised of not fewer than five faculty, along with student representatives, be immediately appointed to collaborate with the University Administration in order to evaluate a location for the research park. The work of the committee is to be completed within 30 days from today. (passed by Faculty Senate 3/26/2009) (Deadline extended by motion passed at 4/23/2009 Senate meeting: new deadline of May 8, 2009.)

Faculty Senate Executive Committee's charge to implement the foregoing motion for the Ad Hoc Committee:

1. Are there compelling reasons to site the Research Park in the Century Forest and that portion of the North Woods now used as a natural outdoor laboratory? Are these sites the only viable options on the Kingston Campus?
2. What other sites on the Kingston Campus or in the North Woods might be used for the Research Park?

## **Background 1**

- Consultants were hired in 2007 to evaluate various sites for a research park. To the committee's knowledge, the consulting report and site selection process did not evaluate potential impacts of the research park site on the teaching or research use of natural lands in or near the Kingston campus.
- Since October 2007, a number of faculty have been meeting with administration officials to raise concerns about the impact of building a research park on teaching and research use of the forest land north of Flagg Road. To the committee's knowledge, the scope of the potential conflict was not clear to some key decision-makers prior to the March 2009 meeting of the Faculty Senate.
- The site selected, north of Flagg Road, generated a dilemma between the interests of research and teaching facilities for different disciplines and the potential for the Research and Technology Park to generate new collaborations and financial support within the comprehensive URI mission.
  - Is it necessary to judge one set of disciplines as preeminent? Are the purposes mutually exclusive?

## **Background 2**

- The committee solicited presentations, correspondence and informal conversation with concerned faculty members and other scientists regarding the ability to sustain an interior-forest character in a parcel of 20 acres or less, and the use of the NW-1 plot (century-old upland forest plot) as a benchmark for research and teaching about ecology and disturbance.
- Based on this input, the committee sees high value in retaining the century-old forest area as a

unique and highly accessible research and teaching resource for biological, ecological and environmental sciences for faculty, students, outreach.

- In addition the committee sees value as an amenity resource for the citizens of South Kingstown, and its preservation would be consistent with the University's stated dedication to sustainability.
- In addition, numerous letters from current and former students, faculty members, and some general citizen-residents of Rhode Island favor maintaining the century-old forest stand north of Flagg Rd both for environmental amenities and academic programs.

### **Background 3**

- The committee solicited presentations, correspondence and informal conversation with concerned faculty members, other scientists and outside experts (some contacted through the courtesy of Peter Alfonso) regarding the importance of a close, walking-distance proximity between the research park and academic offices and laboratory buildings. These experts including Dr. Edward Rudnic, Founder of MiddleBrook Pharmaceuticals, Inc.; Mr. Gary Shaw, AIA, LEED AP, of Perkins and Will, designers and builders of research park facilities; Mr. William Tente, manager of a start-up company in RTP, NC; Dr. Philip Boudjouk, Vice President of Research, Creative Activities and Technology Transfer, NDSU.
- Based on this input, the committee sees high value in a close proximity between academic and private buildings for biology, pharmacy, chemistry, engineering, physics and research of commercial value. Such proximity facilitates interactions among faculty and private sector partners, as well as student involvement.
- The committee has received expert opinion that close, walking-distance proximity may be critical to the success of a research park at URI due to our disadvantages relative to other institutions with access to urban or transportation infrastructure and other aspects of URI's research enterprise.
- The committee supports the concept of a research park.

### **Background 4**

- Both a research park and environmental sciences affect our economy and workforce development
  - Environmental disciplines are critical to citizens' quality of life and economic development compatible with environmental compliance and human health
  - Commercially-valued research is critical to other aspects of human health, creating new businesses, and potentially generating revenue for URI
- The Faculty Senate's role concerns the impact on academic mission and program priorities
  - It may be counter productive to evaluate the issue as environmentalists versus developers.
  - The issue for the Senate concerns a conflict of academic resources.

### **Mitigation options**

- Research park potential locations
  - On-campus, in-fill sites appear to be available. The committee acknowledges that in-fill options may infringe upon future use of land south of Flagg Road for growth of academic

buildings, and could require that research park buildings be separated from each other, rather than clustered. The committee nonetheless believes these sites could be further evaluated for the research park as initial buildings could be placed even closer to key academic buildings such as Pharmacy or CBLS (the new bio-tech building).

- The committee believes that the space at the west end of Flagg Road, including the existing parking lot and turf field neighboring the former South Kingstown/Narragansett land fill (which itself borders the more northerly URI hazardous waste site) remain available for consideration. There may also be some buildable acres of woods (not century-old) east of the parking/turf field site. The committee recognizes that such sites would sacrifice the immediate walking-distance proximity to CBLS and other north campus science buildings.
- The committee believes university evaluation of locations that do not maintain immediate proximity to north campus science buildings should entertain options to mitigate for proximity, such as:
  - building a covered walkway(s) to facilitate all-weather walking;
  - strategic, reserved and well-enforced parking for research park tenants next to CBLS or on Flagg Road with similar private parking near research park buildings for collaborators;
  - active, short duration shuttle bus service connecting research park buildings and science buildings;
  - provision of a collection of electric “golf carts” for exclusive use of research park tenants;
  - installation of on-demand teleconferencing connecting collaborators).

Versus

- Outdoor natural lab potential locations
- The committee believes no alternative century-old forest exists next to the Kingston campus that can substitute for the instructional and research value of the 20-acre century-old upland site presently on Flagg Road. The committee obtained comments (see appendices) showing the following:
  - Other Rhode Island sites require 40 to 120 minutes round trip by bus/van for 1200 students, as nearly all other forest sites this old are close to the Connecticut border.
  - The committee was unable to identify mitigating options that would enable a division of the 20-acre parcel between research park and environmental science use while substantially retaining educational and research value of the remaining acres. This judgment relies in part on outside expertise that the committee solicited from Professor Norman Christensen, immediate past President of the Ecological Society of America and Founding Dean of Duke University’s Nicholas School. (See appendix for Dr. Christensen’s statement, including how Duke’s Board of Trustees addressed a similar dilemma at their institution.)
  - The committee believes loss of the century-old upland forest on Flagg Road would lead to substantial reduction in curriculum elements currently supported and including elimination of experiential learning opportunities.
  - The committee understands that video tools to substitute for experiential learning would be inadequate and not rise to accepted minimal standards in environmental science disciplines.

### **Creative mitigation**

- The committee is intrigued by and encourages consideration of suggestions to mitigate for proximity
  - Can a “Collaboration Station” be established centrally – an outstanding coffee shop, café where researchers could meet with faculty and students in a central location?
  - Covered walkways connecting research park buildings to buildings on campus
  - A reliable shuttle service that rapidly moves researchers, faculty, and students at North end of campus
  - Other creative suggestions are possible and could be part of a solution.
  - Landscaping options to address scenic amenities associated with some alternative locations were also discussed.

### **Risks**

- Numerous sources (administration, faculty, outside experts) say developing a research park is a risky proposition – particularly on the Kingston Campus. Taking this risk may provide significant gains to the university.
- Placing the research park in proximity to existing research and teaching facilities on campus may mean the difference to financial viability of the project. Our conclusions below recognize this perspective.
- If the research park fails, how would the building(s) be used?
- The committee feels there are alternative site options that have not been adequately considered up to this point.
- There is *certainty* of loss from cutting the century-old upland forest and removing this unique educational resource.
- In light of certain losses, the committee finds the risky nature of the research park justifies caution.

### **Conclusion**

- The committee does not find compelling reasons that the century-old forest site is the BEST and ONLY location for a research park because:
  - The committee believes there may be alternative sites available that could increase proximity to developing research facilities (e.g., new Pharmacy building) and existing infrastructure (Emporium and Fine Arts parking lot).
  - The committee feels that the research park could start out as one (or a few) building(s) embedded in the campus infrastructure south of Flagg Rd. The committee recognizes that this suggestion involves allocating space that is currently available for future academic buildings. If over time, the research park becomes financially successful, then plans should be developed to expand the park, possibly including a transition to alternative sites and transitions in use of buildings.
  - The committee believes that steps that could mitigate or attempt to mitigate for proximity differences should be given more consideration. If university planning processes eliminate sites south of Flagg Road, then the committee recognizes that other sites that maintain the century-old upland forest as natural outdoor laboratory mean the loss of immediate, walking-distance proximity between the research park and academic buildings.

- The committee did not uncover viable methods to mitigate for the ecological consequences of partial or full development of the century-old upland forest (NW-1) and its role as a benchmark in existing research and teaching programs.
- The committee believes the research park should be established at a site that does not require partial or complete loss of the century-old, upland forest.
- The committee agrees that close walking-distance proximity is of high value to the operation of a research park. However, the committee is persuaded that other reasonable alternatives could be found within or next to the Kingston campus. Moreover, the committee sees the value of the century-old upland forest for existing academic programs as significant, and that ecological-science compels the conclusion that dividing the 20-acres is not a viable basis for compromise.
- We therefore see no compelling reason that the current site must be used for the research park.
  
- In addition, URI's planning documents and various statements of principle suggest that URI has a duty to teach its students to consider the issues of sustainable development and loss of the century-old upland forest site would be inconsistent with this stated goal of URI.

### *Alternative Sites*

- While a complete evaluation of in-fill possibilities and alternative sites rightly belongs in the campus planning process, this committee suspects in-fill possibilities and other sites exist for development of the research park:
  - (1) Build as part of science quad, on south side of Flagg Road
  - (2) Site on the east of Coastal Institute, replacing the Resource Development Lab – closer to Pharmacy
  - (3) Establish private-sector space as top floor of new academic buildings, such as CBLIS, and establish appropriate criteria for transitioning to new space as the research park becomes successful or academic growth demands.
  - (4) Build parking garage in Fine Arts for researchers, faculty, staff, and students. Researchers could pay higher parking fees to offset costs for students.
  - (5) Use turf field south of former South Kingstown Landfill, at west end of Flagg Road, and create dedicated shuttle to move people around North campus, possibly establishing a covered walkway as well, using landscaping as appropriate for amenity concerns.
  - (6) Leverage brownfield site over former landfill(s), which, in a long-run view could enable URI or private partners to access federal incentives for brownfield re-development.

Appendices A-H include comments from citizens, outside and inside URI experts, alumni, administrators, faculty, and students.

Appendix A – Statement from Professor Norman Christensen, Duke University

Appendix B – Collected comments – outside experts, faculty, staff, administration

Appendix C – additional Collected Comments

Appendix D – Statement from Lorraine Joubert regarding availability of other old forest in Rhode Island, with state map.

Appendix E – Collected letters, primarily from outside URI

Appendix F – Audubon Society letter

Appendix G – Handouts from Frank Golet – rationale for teaching value and outdoor lab

Appendix H – Email correspondence – Swallow-Alfonso-Weygand

In addition, the committee reviewed Beta-North consulting reports prepared for the University of Rhode Island in evaluating various alternative sites (available at

<http://www.uri.edu/administration/Documents/URI%20Research%20Park,%20Final%20Report.pdf>

<http://www.uri.edu/administration/Documents/URI%20Research%20Park,%20Full%20Appendix.pdf>

<http://www.uri.edu/administration/Documents/Research%20Park%20Study%20Public%20Forum%20Presentation,%2010-16-07.pdf> ) as well as reports prepared by URI faculty Keith Killingbeck and Frank Golet:

[http://www.uri.edu/facsen/North\\_Woods.pdf](http://www.uri.edu/facsen/North_Woods.pdf)