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Metropolitan Transportation Planning Organization
2009 NW 67 Place, Suite A
Gainesville, FL 32653

Dear MTPO,

During the past year the University of Florida has searched for a decision on whether to donate a right-of-way and provide the necessary land to connect SW 24th Avenue east of 34th Street to Archer Road. Since coming to Florida in January, 2004 I have been briefed and advised by many people regarding this proposed road through our Natural Area Teaching Laboratory. Both the University Student Senate and Faculty Senate have considered the issue and provided input. I am satisfied the University has been diligent and comprehensive in its deliberations and I have reached the conclusion I cannot support this proposal to extend this road through University property. Please allow me to review our findings and offer some modest suggestions for the future.

History

The SW 24th Avenue road has its origin in the 1997 SW 20th Avenue charette which led to the creation of the concept of a grid network of roads in the southwest area that would attract developers to build a "student village" in close proximity to the University of Florida. It was felt the first phase of this development should be the improvement of SW 24th Avenue west of 34th Street. In 1998 the University committed \$3.2million for this part of the project.

In the 20th Avenue charette it was envisioned that SW 24th Avenue would eventually be extended as a two-lane road east to Archer Road. There was no timetable or other documentation of this step but it was included in the Gainesville Metropolitan Area Livable Communities Reinvestment Plan, which passed in the year 2000.

The Role of the University

The University of Florida recognizes we are a source of traffic congestion in Gainesville. Over 50,000 people commute to campus daily, including 18,000 faculty and staff and over 34,000 students. Our impact is not just on traffic. We are the county's largest employer and contribute significantly to the local economy.

In recent years the University has made substantial steps to reduce traffic congestion, and we intend to do more. So far, we have:

- increased bus rider ship 12% annually by working with RTS, the City and the County
- provided approximately \$6 million annually in funding to RTS
- offered UF employees free bus rider ship
- placed new limits to students' use of cars on campus
- improved on-campus bus service
- created dedicated carpool parking spaces to encourage carpooling
- spent \$1million on improved sidewalks and bicycle lanes, especially north and east of campus.
- improved lighting for safer pedestrian travel.

Why We Must Say No

The University has limited land and a legal obligation to be a good caretaker of our finite resources. We cannot give away University property without a compelling reason. The land in question, the Natural Area Teaching Laboratory, is used by hundreds of students and faculty each semester. Because this land is integrated into the University's academic mission, the Faculty Senate, based on conclusions made by a University fact-finding group, strongly opposes granting this easement. The fact-finding group identified a number of negative impacts that could not be overcome.

While a two-lane extension east of 34th Street was listed among many options in the 1997 charrette, this was not the centerpiece of the plan. In fact, the 24th Avenue extension east of 34th Street was not included in UF's 2000 Master Plan Update, a document which received substantial input from all segments of the University and the public at-large.

The University has just partnered with MTPO to engage a professional transportation consultant to analyze and evaluate the situation in Greater Gainesville. This includes the area in which the easement is requested. The preliminary modeling results do not demonstrate any appreciable roadway improvement through 2010 with the addition of a two-lane eastern extension of SW 24th Avenue.

What CAN we do?

It is clear to me the University, City and County are making a serious effort to reduce traffic congestion. We must continue to pursue alternative road development and we are fully committed to working with the community. I have directed our staff to make a comprehensive review of all available information regarding sources of traffic congestion. We must look beyond the City, and even the County, boundaries to account for commuters arriving at campus from across North Central Florida.

We urge you to proceed with transportation plans west of 34th Street.

If more planning or public input is needed, I will direct the University to work with appropriate planning agencies to extend the scope of our efforts. When it is appropriate for the University to take the lead, I will find ways to do so.

Some of our local traffic problems come from a lack of funding. The University stands ready to contribute its fair share for road improvements and other transportation enhancements. Should it be appropriate for us to seek new funding sources in partnership with local government, we are prepared to do so.

Sincerely yours,

J. Bernard Machen

Cc: Tom Bussing, Mayor, City of Gainesville
Mike Byerly, Chair, Board of County Commissioners