U-M cancels plans for new transportation operations center amid neighborhood pressure

Linh Song, president of the Glacier Highlands Neighborhood Association, speaks to the University of Michigan Board of Regents as her daughter Quynh Song and other neighborhood children hold toy buses they painted to represent the increased traffic in their neighborhood. Amid increased pressure from residential neighbors, U-M announced it
ANN ARBOR, MI - The University of Michigan has decided not to move forward with plans to build a new $38.5 million transportation operations and maintenance center on its North Campus.

The current project, which was put on hold in March by U-M after increased scrutiny from Northeast Ann Arbor residents, will be canceled the university announced on May 24.

"The project development team understands the importance of community engagement in selecting sites for university activities," said Hank Baier, associate vice president for facilities and operations at U-M. "In this case, we should have sought input from our neighbors earlier in the development process. Going forward, this will be our practice as we consider uses for this site as well as others."

Originally approved in May 2014 by the U-M Board of Regents, the initial project called for the 100,000-square-foot building to be constructed near Green Road between Baxter and Hubbard roads, relocating from Kipke Drive on the Stephen M. Ross Athletic Campus.
Baier said the university may, in the future, bring forward a project to either replace or renovate the existing bus facility on Kipke Drive to better meet the university's needs. The proposed center was planned to accommodate current and future maintenance space needs, including the flexibility to handle larger articulated buses.

U-M Lead Public Affairs Specialist Kim Broekhuizen said there was no single factor that led to the university canceling the project.

"The university looked at other sites, but in the end decided to not build a new transportation center on any site," Broekhuizen said in an email.

University officials met with members of the Northeast Ann Arbor Community Coalition Tuesday evening to announce the decision to cancel the project, marking a victory for the coalition, which had banded together since the beginning of the year, to rally against the transportation center's construction.
The coalition -- which consists of residents of approximately 600 households from the surrounding Glacier Highlands Neighborhood, Green Baxter Court, GreenBrier Apartments and Northwood Graduate Housing Complex -- expressed concerns that the transportation center’s location would result in increased sound pollution, air pollution and traffic, putting children and pedestrians in the largely residential area at risk.

"In our minds and many others, it defies common sense that the university would propose this industrial development among our neighborhoods," Northeast Ann Arbor Community Coalition co-president Sandy Aldrich said at last week’s Board of Regents meeting.

University officials listened to concerns brought by the coalition, which applied increased pressure since forming at the beginning of the year to urge U-M to cancel or relocate the transportation center.

The coalition called on its members to put donations to U-M on hold until the bus yard issue was resolved last week, noting that survey data indicated that more than 80 percent of residents in
the coalition donate or have donated to the university at some point.

As proposed, the facility was expected to house about 235 vehicles, including the university’s fleet of 60 buses, and serve as a full-service maintenance center for at least 1,000 vehicles.

The Board of Regents approved schematic plans for the center in April 2015 and passed a resolution stating the project could be let out for bids in December 2015.

It wasn't until a Feb. 25, 2016, meeting between university officials and a crowd of more than 100 people met at the school's North Campus Research Complex to share their frustrations over the proposed transit center that the issue came to a head. During the meeting, residents expressed extreme frustration with what they said was a lack of communication and coordination from the university throughout the planning process.

Plans were eventually put on hold by U-M Present Mark Schlissel, who said the university had withdrawn all permitting and halted plans to retain a contractor in order to take a better look at the project in March.
Schlissel spent some time during his opening remarks at the March regents' meeting addressing concerns that were expressed at that February gathering.

"The recent neighborhood meeting made it clear the university must be more thoughtful and responsive when considering a development that adjoins a residential area," he said. "In the future, our efforts to consider community interests in designing and locating facilities will incorporate more formal outreach far earlier in the development approval process. I apologize that we did not live up to this commitment regarding the transit and operations center project."

As the Northeast Ann Arbor Community Coalition continued to gain support, representatives spoke at the April Board of Regents meeting, with around 100 residents packing the Michigan Union’s Anderson Room and its hallway in support of cancelling the project.

UM Director of Community Relations Jim Kosteva met with neighborhood representatives in April to discuss more of the area's concerns. Topics included objectives for the project, the site selection process to date, traffic information, storm water management, as well as air quality and noise evaluations.
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