

Security Plan for Proposed Davis, Calif., Infectious-Diseases Lab Unveiled.

By Pamela Martineau, The Sacramento Bee, Calif.

02/11/2003

KRTBN Knight-Ridder Tribune Business News: Sacramento Bee
Copyright (C) 2003 KRTBN Knight Ridder Tribune Business News

Feb. 11-The 5-acre complex would be surrounded by two **security** fences, four guard-operated checkpoints and large earthen berms to protect it from car bomb attacks or intruders.

Inside, scientists wearing layers of protective gear would handle dangerous pathogens in pressurized chambers where specimens are stored inside vaults. Special escape routes would be built so scientists and staff could vacate quickly in an emergency.

These and other details of a proposed high-**security** infectious-diseases **laboratory** on the UC Davis campus were released to the public Monday by university officials.

The University of California, Davis, released the 800-page grant application that it submitted to the National Institutes of Health in its bid for funding for a proposed Western National Center for Biodefense and Emerging Diseases.

The application painted a detailed portrait of a proposal to build a \$200 million biocontainment lab where scientists would study some of the most dangerous pathogens known to science, including anthrax, plague and hantavirus.

Proponents of the lab say it will fill a void on the West Coast for a high-**security laboratory** to study emerging diseases and to develop measures to guard against bioterrorism threats.

"The people of the western region of our country face unprecedented new disease threats ... and (the region) is target rich for bioterrorists," the application reads.

The project has sparked intense opposition in the city of Davis, where some residents say it could spread pathogens or become the target of terrorists.

"We do not want Davis to become a bulls-eye target for terrorism," Samantha McCarthy told city leaders last week.

The grant application was formally submitted and signed by UC President Richard Atkinson on behalf of all the universities in the UC system.

The application contained details of safety measures proposed at the facility, along with the safety threats police and **security** officials would need to guard against. Some proposed safety measures were removed from the document that was released to the public as a **security** precaution, university officials said.

The application said the biggest threats to the facility, as identified by the FBI, would be the **theft** of pathogens by employees and attacks by **animal** activists. The threat of terrorism is described as "low" in the document.

To counter that, the lab would require that no individual be allowed to work alone while handling dangerous pathogens, but rather would work with a partner.

Surveillance cameras would operate inside and outside the facility. Cars would be searched before entering the area, and a separate package-intake center would be at the bio lab. Packages would be inspected before entering the facility. An elaborate system of **security** checks and locks would exist inside the facility.

The lab application contains numerous letters of support for the facility, including correspondence from U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif.; Assemblywoman Lois Wolk, D-Davis; state Sen. Mike Machado, D-Linden; as well as Bill Lyons, secretary for the California Department of Food and Agriculture. Steve Peace, director of the California

Department of Finance, submitted a letter saying the state will pay \$25 million of the local matching funds for the project.

"The need for such a lab on the West Coast is overdue and necessary," Boxer writes. "California's expanding population is facing increasing threats from emerging diseases such as West Nile virus and has the highest rate of hantavirus of any state in the nation."

Newspaper editorials and local governmental resolutions in support of the facility also were submitted. The Yolo and Sacramento county boards of supervisors voted to support the lab, as did the Sacramento City Council.

The Davis City Council approved a neutral letter on the lab proposal. Davis council members cited the high level of community concern for the facility and a need for more information as reasons for not supporting the lab at this time. That letter was included in the grant application.

No letters of opposition were included in the application, nor were other references to the organized opposition to the project. More than 150 Davis residents went to two City Council meetings over the past two weeks to voice their opposition to the lab.

The NIH weighs community support for a project before awarding funds.

Lynne Chronister, UC Davis' associate vice chancellor for research administration who directed the grant application process, said it would be unusual for an institution to submit letters of opposition or news articles describing opposition.

"It is a competitive process, and all of the elements are combined to try to put you in the best light possible," Chronister said.

Davis City Councilman Mike Harrington described the university's omission of references to community opposition as "arrogant."

"They are completely misrepresenting to the NIH the feeling of this community," Harrington said.

Joshua English, a member of the group Stop UCD Biolab Now, said his group is working to submit materials to the NIH that would describe the local opposition to the project.

Officials at the NIH are expected to announce the awarding of funds in the early fall. Two labs may be built. Several other institutions in the nation also are vying for the lab funds, including the University of Maryland School of Medicine, which proposes building the facility on the Army's Aberdeen Proving Ground, considered to be one of the most heavily guarded military bases in the country.

Officials at the University of Texas at Galveston, the University of Illinois at Chicago, Boston University and the New York state Department of Health also have expressed interest in the project.

Davis City Councilwoman Sue Greenwald said she believes several of the proposals at these other institutions would be more appropriate than the UC Davis option, which would be in a civilian area.

"Most of the proposed facility sites tend to be at abandoned or operating military bases or at medical campuses - not at the main campus," Greenwald said.

-

To see more of The Sacramento Bee, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.sacbee.com>

(c) 2003, The Sacramento Bee, Calif. Distributed by Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News.