

NEWS

Bioweapons proposal worries neighbors / UC Davis seeks funds to study world's deadliest pathogens

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A UC Davis proposal to build a high-**security** lab for studying potential biological weapons like anthrax and the Ebola **virus** has sparked worry and anger from some residents, who aren't so sure they want the war on terrorism fought in their backyard.

University officials are putting the final touches this week on an application for millions of federal dollars that could make UC Davis an integral part of the nation's response to terrorists. The university wants to build a **laboratory** that could safely study all kinds of exotic pathogens and infectious diseases that pose a threat to both humans and **animals**.

Their scenario: scientists in moon suits, working in a new ultra- safe building at the western edge of campus, developing diagnostic tests and vaccines to identify and contain a dizzying array of biological weapons used to spread sickness and death.

But the UC Davis plan has met with opposition by some who note that the University of California hasn't exactly been a good steward of the nation's defense spending: The university is under fire for failing to prevent the misuse of credit cards and widespread **theft** running into the millions of dollars at Los Alamos National **Laboratory**.

"They can't even keep track of computer parts," said Bill Kopper, a former Davis mayor who is helping lead a well-organized group protesting the lab proposal. "We're talking about some of the most deadly substances known to man."

President Bush underscored the need for scientific help last week in his State of the Union Address, announcing the creation of Project BioShield to fund bioterrorism research.

The National Institutes of Health is making available \$150 million for a new facility that includes a so-called Level 4 lab, equipped to handle the worst biological agents terrorists ever contemplated using.

Other universities in the running for the lab include the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Texas' medical school in Galveston. The University of Texas has also long sought to take over management of Los Alamos National **Laboratory**.

The UC Davis Biocontainment Lab would be the only Level 4 facility on the West Coast. University officials say it would be a safe place for scientists to study some of the world's most dangerous diseases, and everything from fatal strains of influenza to the West Nile **virus** would go under the microscope.

SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

Designed by the same architectural firm that built buildings for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, the facility would be erected to withstand a 747 plane crash and disastrous fires and would require scientists working with the most highly volatile pathogens to clear 10 access points before getting into or out of the lab.

The proposal has plenty of backers, from top researchers already working in the veterinary and medical schools to longtime Davis citizens who take pride in their university's academic achievements.

But in this tree-lined college town – where political battles over development projects rival anything experienced in San Francisco – nothing happens without a fight.

Kopper is one of 12 former elected officials who took out an ad in Sunday's Davis Enterprise newspaper urging the City Council not to endorse the lab. The council is to vote today on a resolution regarding the lab; university officials want to include the resolution in their application to the federal government.

There are only a few Level 4 labs in the country, and none has ever experienced an accident, officials say.

"I understand people's concerns. I think it's safe," said Dr. Frank Murphy, an infectious-disease expert at the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine who is helping plan the project.

Scientists like Murphy – a former head of the CDC and the first person to photograph the Ebola virus – are one big reason Davis should host the new lab, according to UC Davis Provost Virginia Hinshaw.

DAVIS' RESEARCH EMPHASIS

She noted the university had some of the brightest minds in the world studying diseases in both the veterinary and medical schools, making the new program a perfect fit.

The Davis campus is loaded with molecular biologists, virologists, immunologists and bacteriologists, who work in research-intensive programs like the National Primate Center and the Center for Comparative Medicine.

Davis researchers are on the front line in efforts to contain exotic Newcastle disease, which has forced the slaughter of 1.7 million chickens in Southern California.

"We truly already have a unique combination of expertise," Hinshaw said.

Many in Davis back the plan, noting the university will improve its prestige and help the country in a new kind of war, where enemies are armed with things much worse than bombs.

"Somebody's got to do this work, and those are some of the most intelligent people in the world working over there," said Jacke Leo, owner of Aggie's Barber in downtown Davis. "I think they know what they're doing."

But in a town that saw major clashes over proposals to build a Target and a Borders, opposition is fierce.

OPPOSITION AMONG RESIDENTS

More than 100 residents turned out at a recent public forum to denounce the project. They've developed a Web site and are quick to tick off reasons why the lab is a bad idea.

Nightmare scenarios abound, from terrorists attacking Davis to rogue lab employees sneaking out with a vial of plague. Lab detractors say they don't want Davis to live out some sort of virus-gone-haywire Michael Crichton novel.

The university doesn't plan to conduct an environmental review until it gets initial approval for the project. Detractors note that environmental reviews are typically done before projects are funded, and they note the university and the state will have to pitch in \$50 million to go along with the federal dollars.

Opponents are angry that the university is only now holding public hearings, just as they are turning in the proposal to the federal government. It's due Feb. 10, and government officials are expected to announce this fall which institution receives funding.

University officials say, however, that it will take at least five years to open the lab, allowing plenty of time to talk.

In the meantime, even Davis residents who aren't up in arms over the proposal say there are plenty of mixed feelings.

"Why can't they do something in physics, instead of something so scary," wondered real estate agent Marian Flanders as she sipped coffee at a downtown Starbucks.

BIOSAFETY LEVEL RATINGS

Here's a look at the hazards involved in work at laboratories with different biosafety levels.

BIOSAFETY LEVEL 1

Work with strains of microorganisms not known to cause disease in healthy adult humans.

BIOSAFETY LEVEL 2

Work done with a broad spectrum of indigenous, moderate-risk agents associated with human disease of varying severity.

BIOSAFETY LEVEL 3

Work done with indigenous or exotic agents with a potential for respiratory transmission and which may cause serious and potentially lethal infection.

BIOSAFETY LEVEL 4

Work with dangerous and exotic agents that pose a high individual risk of life-threatening disease that could be transmitted through the air and for which there is no available vaccine or therapy.

Source: UC Davis, office of biosafety

PHOTO; Caption: Albert Van Geelan tests retroviruses at the UC Davis Center of Comparative Medicine. Supporters of a bioweapons lab argue that it would fit in with the university's emphasis on disease research. / Lance Iversen/The Chronicle