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UCSB Staff

University progresses on development plans to expand student housing

With a goal to expand residential housing for students, UC Santa Barbara continues to advance on a development plan that will create 3,500 new student beds on the main campus, in accordance with the targets highlighted in the university's 2010 Long Range Development Plan (LRDP).

The first phase of the two-part project includes 2,224 new student beds and is expected to be ready for occupancy by the fall of 2027; an additional 1,400 beds are projected to be completed by 2029.

The California Coastal Commission in April 2025 approved phase one, San Benito Student Housing. That follows the January 2025 approval by the UC Board of Regents of external financing and the project budget for San Benito. The Regents previously approved the project scope, adopted California Environmental Quality Act fundings, approved an amendment to the LRDP and approved the design.

"Our team is energized and excited by the progress of the San Benito development project," said Willie Brown, UCSB's associate vice chancellor for Housing, Dining & Auxiliary Enterprises. "By adding 2,224 new beds in 2027 with San Benito, UC Santa Barbara is working to meet our student housing targets. Our team has been working diligently to present these projects to the UC Regents on time and on budget."

Previously, the university on July 21, 2023 issued a request for qualifications to architectural firms to expand student residential housing options on campus. On Oct. 25, it announced the selection of two renowned architectural firms — Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) of Los Angeles, in association with Mithun of Seattle — to oversee the design and construction process for housing on the campus sites identified in the LRDP. The new residences will include dining facilities and common area amenities, and will incorporate pedestrian and vehicular circulation.

At that same time, Chancellor Henry Yang, in consultation with the Academic Senate, appointed a committee consisting of faculty members, housing and dining staff, and administrators to oversee the planning phase of the project. The Student Housing Project Building Committee is helping to guide the work of the architects and will ensure that all objectives are met and that the project remains on budget and on time.

“We’re off and running and we’re moving as fast as we can,” said Brown, committee co-chair. “We’ve gotten substantial input from the building committee, which is representative of faculty, staff and students, and we have been proactively going out directly to students and asking what they do and don’t like about residence hall and apartment life, so we can design into the new facilities the things they’d like to see in their residential communities. The design charettes that the architectural teams have conducted with our student stakeholders have produced valuable information that has been incorporated into the initial project work.”

The first phase of the project, San Benito, is a student community to be built on a roughly 5-acre site between Mesa Road and Stadium Road, the former location of UCSB’s Facilities Management division and Transportation and Parking Services. (Those departments have recently vacated to an off-campus location.)

Preliminary conceptual drawings for San Benito serve to illustrate the location’s potential: multistory buildings, with mountain views from one side and a sightline to the ocean on the other, connected by a central promenade and plaza. Envisioned as mostly four-bedroom apartments with a mix of some doubles and singles, San Benito also will feature amenities such as a market and café, study and game rooms, recreational spaces and both bike and pedestrian pathways connecting the site to the campus as a whole.

“Part of the concept is to try to impact Mesa Road as little as possible, because that is a strong vehicular thoroughfare on campus,” noted Julie Hendricks, campus architect and a member of the project committee. “So the project primary entrance will look toward the south and southeast, and bring folks through the activity, recreation and athletics areas and try to connect strongly with the circulatory paths in that part of campus, while still taking advantage of the beautiful mountain views to the north. It will bring an incredibly dynamic and symbiotic relationship, and a lot more energy, to that part of campus.”

Helping to significantly accelerate the planning process, extensive significant site investigation and preparation have been conducted at and around the San Benito location over the last few years, including mapping environmentally sensitive habitat areas and buffer zones, conducting cultural resource investigations, analyses of circulation (bike lanes, traffic) and geotechnical studies (soil and seismic). Buffer zones and environmentally sensitive habitat areas were previously, and carefully, mapped out.

Conversations with key stakeholders in the project — first and foremost students, as well as housing and dining teams, other staff, administration and faculty — are ongoing.

Phase two of the project is a student residence hall on the southeast end of campus.

The new housing project, said committee co-chair Gene Lucas, “will ensure the campus meets its long-term housing goals, and it will enhance the quality of academic excellence and student life. We are being very intentional about getting input from the students who are going to live there so we can design into the facilities what they would really like to see in terms of living accommodations.

“The university is committed to addressing the housing needs of our students in a thoughtful and comprehensive manner.”

This academic year the campus offered housing contracts to everyone on its application list, and new students recently moved into housing for winter quarter. Currently the university has 256 available beds in undergraduate residence halls, 94 open beds in undergraduate apartments and 18 in San Clemente graduate housing. There also are community housing vacancies in Goleta, Santa Barbara and Isla Vista.

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About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.