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OPINION

Students should allow Amazon to be rebuilt



JOE HARWOOD

After fighting students for almost a year over the fate of the Amazon housing complex, University administrators will soon make a decision whether to turn over the units to a non-profit student cooperative or demolish the 50-year-old "temporary" barracks.

The controversy erupted last fall when the University announced its intent to demolish Amazon and build a sprawling new complex designed by architect Christopher Alexander, the venerated author of the *Oregon Experiment*, better known for his avant garde showcase designs than for creating minimum-cost, low-income housing.

The decision to demolish was based on an engineering report that concluded that by 1996, maintenance costs for the complex would outpace rent revenues. Administrators also considered liability a major concern, as many of the two-story buildings were infested with dry rot. Lead paint and asbestos in some units also contributed to the decision.

When University Housing announced that rents for a two-bedroom unit in the rebuilt complex would probably exceed \$500 per month, Amazon activists went ballistic — justifiably so.

It turned out that Alexander seemed more interested in vying for the cover of *Architectural Digest* with his Amazon design

than with trying to keep material and construction costs to a minimum, which would translate to lower rents. Without going into the lurid details, Alexander was eventually fired by the University and took his designs and a large chunk of University cash back to Berkeley.

At this point, the University was out hundreds of thousands of dollars and had nothing to show for the investment but an over-priced, non-functional experimental complex at 18th Avenue and Agate Street. But administrators still planned to go ahead with demolition even though they had no architect and no plans for a new complex.

In the meantime, Amazon Community Tenants sought to throw a monkey wrench in the eventual demolition process by petitioning the Eugene Historic Review Board for historic status. Their premise was that World War II vets lived in the new buildings now located at Amazon after the war, so the complex did indeed possess historical significance. The strategy worked and the board granted historical status to Amazon, thus holding off the first phase of demolition slated for June, 1994.

Enough of this relatively incomplete history. It should be noted, however, that the Amazon Community Tenants, a highly motivated group of students, called the University on the carpet for mismanagement of the Alexander affair and for trying to conduct the process well out of reach of students — the people who would live in the new units.

After winning with the Historic Review Board and exposing the inept management of the administrators charged with overseeing Alexander, the Amazon activists successfully solicited

the help of community and legislative leaders to preserve Amazon and the low rents they had become accustomed to. This is where the process started to get smelly.

Prior to the Alexander debacle, there was a rather wide base of support for rebuilding the decrepit structures. Students wrongly assumed the University would shop around for an architect to design basic, no-frills housing that would offer relatively low rent. The University failed miserably in this respect. It was only when the high-rent figures were announced that the Amazon Community Tenants started screaming about historical status and preserving the "unique community" of Amazon.

Many of those activists were the same people complaining that a \$10 rent increase in the summer of 1993 would force them out into the streets, onto welfare and out of school. The same group, in a juvenile act of defiance, held off paying rent for several months. In the real world, a landlord would have laughed at such an idiotic stunt while calling the Sheriff's Department to start eviction proceedings. But I digress.

So now, the Amazon tenants have set up a non-profit, student-run cooperative to take over and manage Amazon. The University, tail between its legs in a proper act of humility, is considering allowing the cooperative to manage the complex for a one-year trial period. The cooperative has stated a mere \$3 million in renovations could save the most ramshackle of apartments and rents would fall somewhere in the neighborhood of \$220-250 with the option to work eight hours a month and reduce rent by \$40.

While proponents of the coop-

erative have invested considerable time in the idea, they ignored several aspects of reality.

Many of the two-story units lack concrete foundations and are not quite earthquake proof. The entire complex is awash with dry rot and some units still have asbestos and lead paint in them — a real problem when little junior starts to eat chipped paint. The worst hazard of all is fire. Amazon is a literal tinderbox waiting for a spark. That must be why the Eugene fire department scrutinizes the complex so carefully each year — it knows the potential danger.

The saddest part of all is that the individuals pushing the cooperative are only looking out for their narrow self-interest. By trying to hang on to low-income housing at least until they graduate, they are denying other families low rents in the future. The cooperative could, at most, keep the complex standing for another 15 years, until the city wakes up and condemns the structures. By that time, construction materials and labor will have increased dramatically compared to 1994 dollars, making rents even higher for the future students.

As for a student-managed cooperative, I won't even get into the fact that students in the past have proven they can barely manage their own affairs, let alone a 400-plus unit complex.

If those proponents of the cooperative were acting in the best long-range interests of students, they would drop the cooperative concept and let the University, under close scrutiny, begin to rebuild Amazon.

If the working crews come when I still live there, I'll buy the first bulldozer driver a beer.

Joe Harwood will be editorial editor for the Emerald next fall.

Reforms to higher education must provide access

By Peter Sorenson

As a parent and long-time resident of Oregon, as one who has received three degrees from Oregon colleges and universities, as former chairman of the Board of Education at Lane Community College and as a member of the Senate Education Committee, I am very concerned about the future of higher education in Oregon.

The Oregon State Board of Higher Education is considering some new directions. The last significant changes to the structure of higher education in Oregon were made in the 1950s. Some changes are now being considered due to fiscal restraints imposed on higher education by the passage of Measure 5 in 1990.

Higher education in Oregon also faces increased demands for access due in part to demographic factors and the changing nature of Oregon's economy. Therefore, we must change Oregon's system of higher education so it can meet these demands by delivering more services while facing declining state resources. The present estimate is that by 2010, the Oregon State System of Higher Education (OSSHE) must deliver the needed education services to about 80,000 students per year, compared with the approximately 50,000 people per year it presently serves.

Some changes currently being considered include making OSSHE a public corporation, similar to the status of Oregon Public Broadcasting. OSSHE estimates that shifting to public corporation status should save at least \$10 million per year. Almost half of that savings would come in purchasing and contracting. Other large savings are forecast

in the areas of personnel policies, investment of funds and state contract laws. OSSHE estimates that savings from elimination of duplicative procedures will allow an additional 2,000 undergraduate students access.

Currently, all Oregon's public four-year colleges and universities have a single governing board and chief executive offices. This system is similar to that found in a number of states, including Idaho. One alternative system being discussed is the single university system in which a single governing institution would be formed with numerous campuses. All Oregon colleges and universities would have the same name followed by their location (for example, University of Oregon at _____). A dual university system is another alternative, and would be composed of universities and state colleges. Universities would reduce their undergraduate bodies, concentrate more on off-campus technologies and focus on research and graduate programs. State colleges would focus more on undergraduate education.

State colleges and universities would make education and services accessible from off campus using modern technologies and telecommunications. Proposals also include finding ways to enable and encourage students to finish their degrees more quickly.

Regardless of which specific changes are addressed, the guiding principles of reforming higher education are to make OSSHE more flexible. Less than 25 percent of its funds will come from tax revenue by 2010 so it must provide better access to higher education, especially to under-represented minorities and people with low incomes. It

We must change Oregon's system of higher education so it can meet these demands by delivering more services while facing declining state resources.

must invest in both capital goods and human resources to improve the delivery of its services.

As former chair and current member of the Board at LCC, I am interested in expanding the existing collaborations between OSSHE and community colleges, such as the 2 + 2 program. Community colleges can deliver the courses needed for transfer to four-year colleges, and can do so more inexpensively than four-year institutions. Therefore, it may be possible under a revised system for community colleges to assume more of the undergraduate education, leaving four-year colleges and universities more freedom to concentrate on upper division and graduate education and research.

Since these issues are sure to affect many students, employees of colleges and universities as well as businesses, citizens and taxpayers, I invite anyone with concerns about the future of higher education to get in touch with me.

Peter Sorenson is a state senator, representing District 20. He can be reached at P.O. Box 10836, Eugene, OR, 97440.