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UCSD officials drop plan to raze chancellor's house

By Tanya Sierra

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LA JOLLA – After four years of intense community protest and just under \$1 million spent, UC San Diego officials have withdrawn their plan to demolish the 56-year-old chancellor's house and will instead renovate it.

The white Pueblo Revival-style mansion, which sits atop a La Jolla bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, was condemned in 2004 because of seismic deficiencies and plumbing, electrical and structural problems.

Soon after, university staff pledged to raise \$7 million to raze and rebuild the home, which is known as the University House.

But Native American groups fought the plan with vigor, saying that knocking down the house and rebuilding it would further disturb a sacred Indian burial site underneath.

Local history buffs also feared La Jolla's character would change with another old house being swept from the landscape. Historians say the home is one of the few remaining examples of the Pueblo Revival style.

Opponents managed to get the home placed on a National Register of Historic Places and on a list of sacred Indian burial sites, making it more difficult for the university to bulldoze the house.

At a hearing last week convened by the Native American Heritage Commission, university officials presented a formal letter announcing that demolition is no longer part of the plan.

“We will now be pursuing a renovation and rehabilitation project at the University House site instead of demolishing the existing residence and constructing a new one,” wrote Gary Matthews, who oversees UCSD's planning department.

No cost estimates have been given on restoring the home, campus architect Boone Hellman said, because that plan hasn't been developed yet. He said the university spent almost \$1 million on the last plan.

While the University House remains vacant, Chancellor Marye Ann Fox continues to live in a rented house off campus. The \$6,500 a month in rent is paid by the University of California.

The letter presented at last week's hearing asked that, in light of the new plans to renovate instead of bulldoze, the heritage commission hold off on making any declaration that the University House project would result in “severe and irreparable damage to the site.”

But the commission voted to designate the site a burial ground, essentially making such a declaration, said tribal attorney Courtney Coyle.

When a public site is deemed a sanctified cemetery, place of worship or ceremonial site, it is subject to the State Public Resources Code, which gives it extra protection.

“The majority of the public does not understand the importance of these burials to Indian people,” said Larry Myers, executive secretary of the Native American Heritage Commission.

The county's Kumeyaay tribes are still seeking the return of skeletal remains dug up more than 30 years ago at the site. Since being removed, the remains have twice been shipped across the country, making pit stops at various museums. They are deemed almost 10,000 years old.

The tribes are intent on repatriating the bones, which for now are locked away in a museum safe near Escondido.

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