

An Open Letter to Dr. John Hennessy President, Stanford University

Dear Dr. Hennessy,

Stanford's administration seems unreasonably determined to demolish the historic Bracewell Radio Astronomy Observatory on Alpine Road.

A University statement, as quoted in the Palo Alto Weekly on February 10th, makes the argument that the five 60-foot dish antennas should be demolished because there is no "continued University purpose."

Let's consider the facts:

- Stanford Astronomy Professors Vahe Petrosian, Roger Romani and Bob Wagoner convinced Professor Stan Wojcicki, Head of the Department of Physics to request incorporation of the dishes into the Astronomy group's educational programs.
- Professor Umran Inan, Director of Stanford's STAR Laboratory, proposed to Dean Plummer that he would like to use the antennas to track and communicate with clusters of microsatellites carrying Stanford instrumentation that he has already developed, providing unprecedented measurements in space and time of ELF (Extremely Low Frequency) fields, his core research area.
- Professor Bob Twiggs, Director of Stanford's SSDL (Space System Development Lab) has proposed using the dishes to track and communicate with his current and planned student-built microsatellite missions, including a possible student lunar-flyby mission.
- Professor Dave Leeson has proposed using the antennas as part of his EE 144/245 teaching labs, which were established by him to preserve Stanford's EE accreditation.
- Professor Len Tyler would like to use the antenna array in the teaching of his antenna array course.
- Professor Per Enge would like to use the extremely high gain these dishes provide to directly observe pre-correlator signals radiated from GPS satellites to increase the accuracy of this technology. He is a GPS expert with Stanford's new Center for Navigation and Time.
- Senior Research Associate Ivan Linscott would like to participate in restoring and upgrading the Bracewell Observatory dishes because they afford exciting opportunities to involve students at all levels in NASA/JPL planetary exploration missions.
- Two Stanford student clubs have also submitted requests to use the observatory for their club activities with our support. These ASSU-sanctioned groups are the Stanford Astronomical Society (SAS), and the Stanford Amateur Radio Club.

These are not outsiders. Their activities are at the very heart of the University's true interests. Each represents a real continued University purpose.

Recently, NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) approached Stanford with a proposal to explore collaboration with interested Stanford faculty to bring the dishes back into operation for educational, research, and outreach use, which could be done at little or no cost to Stanford. The proposal is their initiative.

Why has the administration not engaged in a real dialog with JPL?

I would like to offer an idea for your consideration. A reasonable way for Stanford to show that it is being fair to faculty and students, as well as to JPL, would be for the administration to officially sanction collaboration between all interested Stanford faculty members and JPL in developing a final proposal, to be completed within a reasonable timeframe (such as between now and the end of the academic year). This would provide a protective umbrella for the process, would allow all voices to be heard, and would create a setting in which a final University decision, whether up or down, will be respected by all.

In a recent article, you wrote that Stanford must pursue "... a new multidisciplinary approach to teaching and research that seeks solutions to critical global problems concerning the environment..." (Stanford magazine, January/February 2006, p. 4).

Much of what we are learning about our environment on a global scale is coming from space research, including remote earth sensing and comparative planetary science. The world leader in these fields is NASA/JPL. This unique opportunity to open the door to collaboration between Stanford faculty and NASA/JPL will ultimately create long term relationships that will help lift teaching and research to greater heights, and is in direct alignment with Stanford's commitment to the future.

Respectfully,

Bob Lash, M.D.

President
Friends of the Bracewell Observatory Association (FBOA)

Web site: http://www.bambi.net/stanford_dishes/rescue.html