

UC Berkeley's Vision: A 486,000 SQFT 'Innovation Zone' in Downtown Berkeley

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By [The Registry Staff](#)

The University of California, Berkeley, has unveiled an ambitious plan to establish an "innovation zone" in downtown Berkeley, further solidifying its reputation as a leading hub for scientific research and development in its hometown. This transformative project will feature two large laboratory buildings totaling 486,000 square feet, providing state-of-the-art facilities for cutting-edge research, including genome engineering. While this endeavor promises to bolster Berkeley's position in the world of innovation, it also raises questions about its impact on the surrounding community.

UC Berkeley's vision for the innovation zone encompasses nearly two acres, occupying half a city block to the west of the campus. This project requires the demolition of several UC-owned buildings on University Avenue, including two city-landmarked structures that currently house small businesses, such as a poke restaurant and a Thai eatery, according to [Berkeleyside](#).

The university has indicated that it will conduct an environmental impact study for the project. Importantly, as these properties are owned by the university, UC Berkeley does not need city approval to proceed with their redevelopment. While construction is tentatively slated to commence by the end of 2024, the final timeline and budget are still under consideration.

This initiative is a significant stride in Berkeley's ongoing efforts to expand its research capabilities. Several life sciences campuses are either under construction or in the planning stages in West Berkeley, including the former site of Pacific Steel Casting and a substantial expansion by pharmaceutical giant Bayer.

The proposed development consists of two laboratory buildings and a multi-story parking garage. The larger of the two structures, the North Building, will be eight stories tall, covering approximately 310,000 square feet. This building will be leased to a private developer and will house the Innovative Genomics Institute, a collaborative effort between UC Berkeley and UC San Francisco, led by Nobel laureate Jennifer Doudna. The specific purpose of the South Building, which spans approximately five floors and 176,000 square feet, is yet to be determined.

UC Berkeley's long-range development plan has designated this site for development, aligning with the university's goals of expanding academic and research space. With major seismic retrofitting projects slated for completion by 2030, the university faces the challenge of accommodating researchers whose buildings will be temporarily closed during these renovations.

To address this, the university plans to demolish University Hall and its annex, primarily home to administrative offices, as well as two city-landmarked commercial buildings. While these structures hold historical significance, the university asserts that it must proceed with this development to meet critical academic and research space requirements.

UC Berkeley has taken measures to support the small businesses affected by this project, offering relocation assistance to the establishments currently housed in the city-landmarked buildings.

Berkeley City Councilmember Rigel Robinson, representing the student district, sees the establishment of laboratory space as a vital step in turning Berkeley into a thriving scientific research hub. He has introduced a proposal aimed at rezoning additional areas of Berkeley to allow for the construction of research and development sites, thereby expanding opportunities beyond the university.

Robinson emphasizes that the university should not be the sole entity creating these opportunities and generating jobs for Berkeley residents. He contends that the shortage of lab space in Berkeley has led startups to seek alternatives in neighboring jurisdictions like Emeryville and Alameda, resulting in the loss of potential jobs and opportunities for the local community.

UC Berkeley's "innovation zone" project represents an exciting opportunity to enhance the university's research capabilities and further establish Berkeley as a hotspot for scientific innovation. However, it also raises questions about the impact on the local community and the need for a broader strategy to ensure that the benefits of this growth extend beyond the university.