

CSU's Todos Santos center criticized by Mexican residents

by Skyler Leonard
June 18, 2014

A Colorado State University center under construction in a small Mexican coastal community is being scrutinized by community members because of the University's connection with a developer planning a housing project that could triple the population of the small town.

Todos Santos, located on the Pacific side of the Baja peninsula, is a small town of 5,000 people. About 47 miles from Cabo San Lucas, the town is primarily a fishing village that also supports a sizable community of American expatriates.

MIRA, a housing developer based out of the Denver company Black Creek, is planning a large housing development called Tres Santos that could potentially triple the population of the city. Alongside the housing project, the company donated land to CSU. According to CSU Provost Rick Miranda, the donation agreement with MIRA gave CSU access to a few acres of land and buildings constructed by MIRA. In return, CSU will use the land for research, teaching and community outreach.

According to Miranda, MIRA has no control over what CSU plans and will operate separately from developers if they continue the housing project or not.

"We are going to be very independent whether they build anything or not," Miranda said.

In an email addressed to CSU administration and *the Collegian*, Susana Mahieux, a co-founder of an environmental board and local, wrote on behalf of residents and raised many concerns about

the environmental and economic impacts of the housing development along with CSU's involvement with the project. "It is hard to understand how, through your participation, you can support this project, especially given that your course outline includes water conservation, sustainable development and general ecological balance. Tres Santos will negate every principle you propose to teach," Mahieux wrote.

Leticia Maldonado, a CSU graduate and president of the CSU Latin American Students and Scholars Organization, was sent by CSU to Todos Santos to gather community input earlier this year. Maldonado said she was surprised by the negative feedback she received from the community and the involvement of MIRA. Maldonado left a meeting with the developers feeling disheartened by their plans.

"I was very disappointed by the type of language that was used," Maldonado said. "It was clear that there was no cultural competence. I was the only woman of color in a room full of white people talking about the needs of this town and it was really concerning because it didn't really seem like the people understood what the concerns of the town actually were."

Along with meeting the housing developers, Maldonado also met with local researchers and professors from the Autonomous University of Baja California Sur, who were very critical of CSU and the school's involvement with the potentially damaging housing project.

"There was clear opposition to the project. They said as an institution of higher education, 'You should know better.' These companies come and they exploit and extract resources from the town, especially water," Maldonado said. "They said, 'You are educators, too, why aren't you taking this seriously?'"

Even without the housing project, Todos Santos already faces severe water problems, according to John McNerney, a resident of

Todos Santos and member of the local group that sent the email to CSU administration.

“The idea that they are going to teach us about sustainability is kind of a joke,” McNerney said.

According to McNerney, Todos Santos receives an average rainfall of about 3 to 4 inches per year and most of the town’s drinking water comes from nearby mountain springs.

MIRA filed an environmental impact report that said they would use a certain amount of water per day. According to Maldonado, the amount is more than what Todos Santos uses in a week.

Beyond water scarcity, Maldonado said the beachfront property could potentially affect marine ecosystems and block local fishermen’s access to the beaches.

“I don’t understand how our administration does not see this partnership as a clear contradiction of our institutional mission and values ... we are a green university,” Maldonado said. “We want to be down there and research water and marine ecosystems and we have two researchers that are marine biologists and marine ecologists that are looking at us in our faces telling us, ‘This project is going to devastate our marine ecosystem.’”

When Maldonado returned to CSU she wrote a report detailing her experience in Todos Santos. On May 9, 2014, Maldonado reported her concerns to the CSU Board of Governors.



According to Miranda, the University is aware of the concerns shared by Maldonado and the Todos Santos community.

“We hear the entire spectrum of commentary and opinion about the development there. Some people are very concerned about it for a variety of reasons ... on the other end of the spectrum there are people who are wildly enthusiastic,” Miranda said.

According to Miranda, whenever CSU officials spoke about their missions and goals in the area, they received very warm feedback. However, Miranda does note the housing project is controversial.

“There is no escape from the fact that the housing development is controversial,” Miranda said. “That’s not anything that we are trying to suppress or walk away from. We think the exact expertise CSU brings is going to be useful to the community and the housing development and more broadly to the region.”

The Collegian reached out to representatives from MIRA for comment, but they have not responded.

The CSU facility in Todos Santos is currently under development and is anticipated to finish in the next year.

Collegian

Senior Reporter Skyler Leonard can be reached at news@collegian.com.

<http://www.collegian.com/2014/06/csus-todos-santos-center-criticized-mexican-residents/79450/>