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## LANL exploring mini-campus for Santa Fe or Bernalillo County

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Los Alamos National Laboratory is exploring the possibility of creating a satellite campus in either Santa Fe or Bernalillo County for part of its growing workforce, continuing the trend of establishing offices for support staff away from the lab's main property on Pajarito Plateau.

The proposed mini-campus, still in the conceptual stage, would relieve stress on traffic and the lab's offices on the Hill and make it easier for employees who commute from Santa Fe and Bernalillo counties, helping the lab to retain workers, said Kelly Beierschmitt, the lab's deputy director of operations.

An increasing number of lab employees live in northern Albuquerque and Bernalillo, partly because of the greater availability of housing and schools, so establishing a workplace closer to them would make logistical sense, Beierschmitt told the Las Alamos County Council during a recent presentation.

"It does help us with the retention challenge when people don't have to drive an hour and a half one-way," he said.

This mini-campus also could provide office space for Sandia National Laboratories, which is experiencing similar overcrowding as its workforce expands, Beierschmitt said.

Spokespeople at Santa Fe and Bernalillo counties said no one from the lab had approached the counties' leaders about the idea. A specific site has yet to be chosen, and nothing will go forward until the National Nuclear Security Administration, which oversees the lab, signs off on the project.

"It's not a certainty that we will do this," Beierschmitt said. "We do not have any approval to do this. We're partnering with the NNSA to explore the idea."

if the project is approved, it would materialize in a few years on a small scale, Beierschmitt said, with about 50 people in an office.

The lab now employs roughly 17,300 people, including subcontractors, he said. LANL anticipates adding 2,000 workers as the lab moves toward its goal of making 30 plutonium warhead triggers, or pits, by 2026.

Pentagon leaders, nuclear security officials and some politicians say the pits are needed to modernize the arsenal so it will act as a stronger deterrent against Russia, China and rogue states. They also would equip at least two new warheads.

The workforce expansion is in line with the lab's budget roughly doubling to \$4.6 billion since 2018, Beierschmitt said.

"We do believe that the growth we have seen the last two to three years is unprecedented, but we don't expect it to continue," he said, predicting it will level out by 2027.

The lab leases about 180,000 square feet of building space off-campus, he said.

That includes two adjacent office properties, totaling 77,000 square feet, at Pacheco Street and St. Michael's Drive near Christus St. Vincent Regional Medical Center. The lab also leases about 28,000 square feet in the downtown Firestone Building, which had housed Descartes Labs, at North Guadalupe and West Alameda streets.

All of the off-campus building space has filled up and the lab will need more to accommodate the upcoming spurt in workforce growth, Beierschmitt said.

At the Santa Fe sites, employees do administrative work, human resources, procurement, finance, information technology, communications and government relations.

Beierschmitt didn't discuss the type of work that would be done at the proposed mini-campus, but one of his PowerPoint slides indicated it would be classified.

A longtime anti-nuclear activist said if the work is classified, the site won't be a normal office complex but would require tight security with a fence and other safeguards.

This will make the lab's expanding presence in the surrounding communities even more intrusive and unwelcoming, said Greg Mello, executive director of the Los Alamos Study Group.

"LANL is already too big, and it aspires to be bigger still — and that's the core problem," Mello said. "They need to grow up and accept cost constraints and geographic constraints."

Beierschmitt said a large part of the beefed-up labor force now is for the massive construction work happening at the lab, much of it infrastructure upgrades to prepare for the pit mission.

When those projects are finished, the construction workers will phase out as the lab hires people for jobs related to pit production, Beierschmitt said. He estimated the tradeoff would keep the workforce at an even plateau, with no overall increases or decreases after 2026.

The heavy construction is all the more reason to reduce the number of people coming up the hill and bumping into it, he said, making satellite campuses a practical alternative.

Mello said the need for more mini-campus springs from the lab's pursuit of pit manufacturing. Get rid of the pits, and there's no need for the lab to branch out into the community, he said.

“LANL is replete with missions which don’t have to be done,” Mello said, “starting with pit production.”

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Reporter