Inside Facebook's Big Move to Menlo Park

FEBRUARY 8, 2011 AT 1:00 AM PT

Facebook is holding a press conference later today to announce it will move to a campus in Menlo Park, Calif., that the company expects to become its long-term home.

News of the move was first reported in the Palo Alto Daily Post in November, and multiple reports of real-estate transactions have been published since. (Those realtors are a chatty bunch!)

Facebook will finally make things official on Tuesday at Menlo Park City Hall.

Its relatively new office complex is on the east side of Highway 101, near the Dumbarton Bridge and not much else. It was formerly occupied by Sun Microsystems, which moved out after being bought by Oracle. When Sun occupied the buildings, most employees had private offices, so Facebook has already been working to tear down walls to create the sort of open floor plan it enjoys at its current office. According to a former Sun employee, every time he’s passed by in recent weeks, the dumpsters have been overstuffed with detritus.

Coincidentally, the address for the new office park is 1601 Willow Road; Facebook’s current main building is 1601 S. California Avenue in Palo Alto.

Facebook’s current offices in Stanford Research Park are definitely less cool than the company’s original home, which was surrounded by restaurants and cafés in downtown Palo Alto. And eastern Menlo Park is much, much less cool. It’s also less bikeable and convenient to public transportation.

But it is considerable consolation to employees that the campus is more accessible to San Francisco, especially relative to most other nearby major tech campuses in the deep south Peninsula and South Bay.

Facebook moved to its current offices in just 2009, and has since expanded down the street to a building on Page Mill Road that currently holds much of its nontechnical staff. The company
currently employs 2,000 people, although sources say it expects to grow to as many as 3,500 before the end of 2011.

Staffers don’t have much reason to venture out, since they are fed three gourmet meals a day plus unlimited snacks.

Prior to the 2009 move, Facebook had expanded to 10 or more buildings in downtown Palo Alto, where it had operated since formalizing operations after being founded by Mark Zuckerberg and some of his Harvard classmates in 2004. The company celebrated its seventh birthday last week.

For most of those years, Facebook offered employees a $600 monthly stipend if they lived within a mile of the offices. When the company uprooted itself two years ago to California Avenue and ended the stipend program, many employees moved their homes out of the immediate area. Facebook now offers multiple shuttles per day from San Francisco and from Caltrain stations near its offices.

Moving from Palo Alto’s main business district to a quiet office park owned by Stanford was a big change for the company, but a necessary one after it outgrew the downtown area. Many of the company’s former downtown offices are now occupied by the analytics start-up Palantir.

Those noisy, frequent shuttle buses that come with a swarm of young employees migrating to work every day are among the annoyances that caused much tension with the residential neighborhood that surrounds Facebook’s current office on California Avenue. Residents of the College Terrace neighborhood have persuaded the city of Palo Alto to institute an actively enforced two-hour parking limit, in part to keep Facebooker vehicles contained in the company’s designated parking lots.

Commenters on local news discussion boards complain that these NIMBY folks drove Facebook, its employees’ business and corporate tax revenue out of town. But the reality is that the social networking giant is too big for its current space, which it had said from the beginning was temporary.

The new Menlo Park campus has 57 acres and one million square feet of office space, and Facebook has already reportedly purchased nearby buildings, likely to ensure it has room for further growth.

Plus, fostering a close-knit pod of employees all living within walking distance of the office has become less important as Facebook expanded. With the company saying it’s likely to go public next year, expectations are that many employees will be buying mansions in the suburbs and pieds-à-terre in the city soon enough.

(You might ask, why do I know so much about the minutiae of Facebook’s office locations? Well, in addition to having covered the company for the last six years or so, I grew up in Palo Alto, my mother lives around the block from Facebook’s current offices (where I am now in constant fear of parking tickets) and my husband (as mentioned in my ethics statement) has done research for the company off and on for the last three years.)

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