

Activists ready for fight over bay-front land

CARGILL ASKS RESIDENTS WHAT THEY WANT AT SALT-POND SITE

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REDWOOD CITY - A battle over the fate of a large piece of bay-front property is brewing, even though the city has received no formal proposal yet for the land.

For the past year, Cargill Salt has been conducting a community outreach program seeking residents' ideas for what to do with its 1,433-acre property, where the company plans to phase out its industrial plant during the next few years.

In recent weeks, the environmental advocacy group Friends of Redwood City has launched its own outreach effort, encouraging residents to tell their elected leaders to maintain the land as open space and not turn it into commercial and residential development.

"We feel it should continue to be for natural and industrial uses," Friends of Redwood City member Cathy Moyer said Thursday.

The group has sent out mailers contending that Cargill and its real estate development arm, DMB Associates, have been on "a massive public relations campaign to win support for a new 'Foster City' on our waterfront."

That scenario would pave over wetlands, do away with recreational opportunities, drain the city's limited water supply and exacerbate traffic congestion, the group said.

Since the start of that campaign, City Hall has received several letters supporting the group's arguments.

In one of those letters, resident Mario Castellon told the council that he backs having habitat restoration, trails and playing fields.

"This is an opportunity for our generation to leave a legacy for future residents of Redwood City to experience the beauty of open spaces and wildlife," he wrote.

According to a survey that's part of Cargill's outreach, nearly 20 percent of residents favor reserving the land for open space and habitat creation.

But the other 80 percent believe the land is large enough to accommodate housing, parks, schools, wildlife preservation and other uses, the survey indicated.

The survey was based on responses from more than 4,500 households, according to Redwood City Industrial Saltworks, a partnership of Cargill and DMB.

Cargill's outreach also involves holding community forums that focus on issues that have emerged as key concerns for residents. A recent forum tackled transportation issues, and housing will be the subject of a May 10 meeting.

"I want to reiterate that we do not have a land plan for this site," John Bruno, spokesman for Redwood City Industrial Saltworks, said in a letter to the San Mateo County Times. "Before we propose future uses for the site, it is extremely important that we have a thorough and accurate understanding of what type of plan would be favorable to Redwood City residents."

In a letter to the Friends of Redwood City, Mayor Barbara Pierce noted that the salt-flats area is zoned "tidal plain," a designation that allows for "extraction of chemicals from sea water," such as Cargill's historic use of the property,

"and public parkland and recreation facilities."

Pierce added, "Any development on the site would require changes to both the zoning and the general plan, which would require substantial community engagement, input and discussion."

The city is updating its general plan, which guides long-term growth and development in a community.

That process in the summer is expected to include a discussion of possible uses of bay-front lands, the mayor said. "I certainly encourage (and expect!) Friends of Redwood City and the community at large to be fully engaged in that discussion."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

For more information, visit the Web sites www.forwc.org and www.rcsaltworks.com.

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