



A mounting controversy

Groups protest future salt pond development

By Julia Scott, STAFF WRITER

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REDWOOD CITY — Two local environmental groups are lining up against a proposed development at the site of the former Cargill salt ponds — without waiting to see what the plans are.

It's been over a year since Redwood City Industrial Saltworks LLC, the partnership handling the proposed transformation of 1,433 acres of salt ponds into a mixed-used development with housing, office space, and recreational facilities, started conducting community outreach to gauge support for the idea.

In May, the partnership, which includes Cargill and upscale real estate developer DBM Associates, Inc., released a survey indicating that 80 percent of Redwood City residents would be open to such a proposal — which could even include building school facilities on the two-square-mile property. Another 20 percent of respondents favored converting the land into a natural wetland, which would involve breaching the levee and transforming the saltwater ponds into a marsh that would support new forms of wildlife. The salt ponds lie near Bair Island, a former salt pond that has since become part of the Don Edwards National Wildlife Refuge.

The project is part of the largest wetlands

restoration plan in Northern California history, which now includes 16,500 acres of former South Bay salt ponds, from Redwood City to Newark.

Any development at the Cargill site would be too much development for Save the Bay, an Oakland-based environmental group that has been watching the Cargill salt pond project for some time. Without having seen a project design, Executive Director David Lewis said his group had already concluded that the project will be irresponsible, unfeasible — and possibly even illegal.

"We don't think former baylands can and should be built on. We think they should transfer all of it to the refuge for restoration. I don't think they're going to be able to get approval to develop on that site," said Lewis.

Wednesday's comments were the first time that Save the Bay has made a public pronouncement on the project, having met with representatives of Industrial Saltworks several times this year.

Among the group's most crucial allies is the small but powerful Friends of Redwood City, a local nonprofit with a long track record of blocking proposed developments on Bayfront properties (in 1982, it overturned the City Council's approval of a major housing development on Bair Island in a voter-led referendum, the first in city history).

Ralph Nobles, a spokesman for Friends of Redwood City and a former planning commissioner for both the city and the county, said his group would do everything within its power to convince Cargill, city officials, and residents of the necessity of returning the land to its historic role as a tidal marsh.

"We hope we don't have to go to a public referendum with the voters, but we're prepared to do whatever we can. We'll have support

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through the whole Bay Area. Everybody know you don't build housing on baylands," said Nobles.

As opposed to the survey results submitted by DBM Associates, Nobles said he believed the "vast majority" of Redwood City residents agreed with him. He suggested it would be "irresponsible" to trust survey data the company itself had compiled, based on their own survey questions.

DBM Associates spokesman John Bruno emphasized that no plans have been drawn up; the company has just finished hiring a team of consultants, and will hold a public meeting for residents Nov. 15 to present a "catalogue" of ideas they got from the community to begin a design process they hope will culminate in a presentation to the Redwood City Council next year. Questions about what kind, how much and where development would take place are premature, he said.

"We heard from the vast majority of residents that they favor a mixture of uses, such as a ballpark, fields, Bay trails, housing and office space," said Bruno. "We're still in the process of putting together materials that will allow us to engage the public."

The property is presently zoned as "tidal plain," which means the company will have to persuade City Council members to amend the city's General Plan to rezone it. Nobles said his group would begin their opposition campaign before the company attempted to do so.

Lewis, of Save the Bay, said building anything on shallow baylands failed to account for the risk of global warming, which scientists estimate could raise water levels by as much as 1 meter, or 3.3 feet, by 2100. More than 200 square miles of land around the Bay could experience flooding, according to projections by the San Francisco Bay

Conservation and Development Commission.

Lewis also questioned the legality of "filling" the Bay, an area over which the BCDC has jurisdiction.

BCDC Executive Director Will Travis suggested that it would be possible for the real estate company to create an "adaptive" design for a project that took sea-level rise into account.

"The easy approach would be, 'Let's run for the hills, pull back from the shoreline,'" said Travis. "But you don't know how far or how fast the water will rise, and there's low-lying lands behind it."

Bruno, of DBM Associates, said the company had not yet incorporated assumptions about sea-level rise into their designs.

As for the legality of the project, Travis is reserving judgment.

"Until somebody comes to me with a proposal, I can't evaluate it," he said.

One point is not negotiable, however. The BCDC's rules for conversion of salt pond properties around the Bay include a provision requiring that should one be developed, a "substantial portion" of the property should remain as baylands. The state has interpreted a "substantial portion" to mean 50 percent, according to Travis.

"The determination of how the rest of it should be used falls to local government," he added.

Historically, Cargill has taken the position that the BCDC holds no jurisdiction over salt pond properties that have included a production plant, such as the one in Redwood City. Regardless, Travis said the company had agreed to comply with the

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agency's permitting requirements.

Bruno would not comment on the 50 percent wetland provision.

"We are exceedingly respectful of the process the BCDC plays in any process like this," he said, without elaborating.

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