

LUXURY DEVELOPMENT THREATENS RICHMOND SHORELINE

Highrises to be built upon toxic waste dump

An enormous, luxury community – billed as the model “urban village” of the future – situated atop a toxic waste dump oozing noxious chemicals?

If this sounds far-fetched, it isn't.

A David-and-Goliath style battle is shaping up in Richmond between a diverse coalition of community and environmental groups and a tenacious development corporation, Simeon Ventures, over the future of the city's shoreline.

Simeon wants to build 1,330 residences, including three 18-story highrises, atop the former Zeneca Chemical Corp. site, a Superfund site pocked with toxic hot spots from chemical production and dumping dating back to the late 1800s. Also in the planning stages is an upscale commercial district along the lines of Berkeley's Fourth Street, or Emeryville's new AMC complex.

A similar effort by Simeon to put a huge housing development on another segment of the Richmond waterfront recently went down to defeat, when community and environmental groups rallied to save that beautiful stretch of shoreline. Breuners Marsh is also contaminated by toxic chemicals.

At a public hearing on March 18, developers and the city's Planning Commission were surprised by an outpouring of grassroots opposition to the new plan. Despite little advance notice of the development proposal, a standing-room-only crowd packed the room, and 29 speakers -- representing a variety of groups and positions -- voiced opposition.

Opposition is focused on the project's adverse environmental and public health impacts, as well as its potential to increase traffic problems and obstruct public access to, and views of, the scenic shoreline, which runs alongside the Bay Trail just north of Point Isabel. In addition, the project will add more upscale housing, similar to the neighboring gated homes of Marina Bay, rather than the more affordable housing that the economically depressed city needs.

Despite some efforts to clean up the site, the developer acknowledges that it remains highly contaminated, with 26 out of 30 recent samples failing to meet minimum safety standards. The developer's proposed solution is to “cap” the contaminants underground, and to install fans to prevent toxic fumes from endangering residents. Opponents point out that similar measures did not protect residents of homes built upon a contaminated site in Redfield, Colorado.

Opponents also cite the destruction of the San Francisco Bay's endangered wetlands, 90% of which have been eradicated in the past century. And high-density residential growth will endanger marshland species, including the endangered Clapper

Rail, they say. Environmentalist opponents include the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, Green Action for Health and Environmental Justice, and Citizens for the Eastshore State Park.

At the recent Planning Commission hearing, a Simeon spokesman touted the so-called "Campus Bay Project" as a premiere planned community of the future, along the lines of other "urban villages" it has designed in Vancouver, San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose.

The 86-acre site belonged to the former Stauffer Chemical Co. before being transferred to Zeneca, who sold it to the real estate firm of Simeon Commercial Properties in early 2003. The deal was financed by Cherokee Investment Partners of Colorado and North Carolina.

The site has long been rumored to be contaminated by radiation from top-secret government research. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Energy identified it as a potential site for the processing of radioactive and toxic materials in a secret project during the Cold War, according to a December 20, 2002 article in the West County Times. Department of Defense documents pertaining to the site remain classified.

Opponents, who along with environmental activists include a loose coalition of community residents and groups, are demanding that the city slow down the project planning, and allow more public input.

— by Karen Franklin