

November 5, 2016

Dear Members of the Brisbane City Council,

Brisbane has a history of prioritizing the health and welfare of its residents and preserving the environment. You and fellow residents who have spent years studying the Baylands understand the issues more deeply than the well-meaning attendees at our city meetings, the local politicians or the media commentators, many of whom find it necessary to “remind” Brisbane that the region is experiencing a severe housing crisis. In our little part of the region, the perception of a crisis is especially great due to the fact that San Francisco’s mayor succeeded in making his town a highly attractive place to locate businesses with lots of employees. At the same time, loads of employees who work south on the Peninsula already live in San Francisco. As a result, many SF landlords have been evicting tenants who make up the city’s middle and working class core to make room for those who can pay more.

Should Brisbane attempt to alleviate this problem to the detriment of its own existence? Pro-housing advocates scold Brisbane for wanting to stay “quaint.” Quaint is the least of it. Informed individuals understand that even if no development occurs in the Baylands, traffic is on track to worsen due to nearby development projects in SF and SSF; unfortunately, Brisbane is stuck no matter what when it comes to traffic. But, how would Brisbane deal with a doubling of the town’s resident population? What about the water? What about the necessary protective services, school facilities and other infrastructure?

Well, some will say that we should rely on the same system of markets that SF’s landlords have benefitted from. After all, markets are at the heart of capitalism, our society’s economic and political framework. In other words, it’s perfectly legal to do what those SF landlords have been doing. And, corporations such as Universal Paragon Corp. operate within this same, legally acceptable economic context. Best of all, corporations pay taxes that will fund the infrastructure for a twice-as-big Brisbane!

But we also know that capitalist principles and practices can be destructive to human life, just as living on land that is known to be toxic is destructive to human life. Reasonable people can disagree about the extent to which the Baylands can be cleaned up, but inherent in capitalism is maximizing profit. The mission of UPC (or any future for-profit entities who take their turn as Baylands owners) is not to increase and ensure the safety of human life. Unfortunately, government does not always meet its regulatory responsibilities adequately. One reason, we should not forget, is that both leadership and funding of regulatory agencies are decided upon by elected officials, and corporations provide financial support for the election of these officials. We witnessed, after the San Bruno tragedy, the extent to which such relationships can go very wrong.

Long-term Brisbane residents are familiar with the degree of the contamination of the former San Francisco dump. Would we live there ourselves? If not, how will we feel about extending a smiling welcome to those who move there without knowing the history? Will they be given assurances of “green and clean” based on a process that cannot be guaranteed to ensure long-term health and safety because doing so is financially infeasible. What about the families who will move there over time, replacing the first, then second occupiers, etc.? This is a familiar story in our country and it is not a good one with a happy ending. I am concerned about comparisons to development in Mission Bay, also. Not enough time has passed to make a reasonable assessment of the safety of building on such compromised land. As it is, buildings must include ventilation from underground because of methane, and we are beginning to learn about sinking and settling of large residential structures. Again: developers will meet the minimum requirements, and in the U.S., those who determine the minimum requirements can be remarkably prone to short-term thinking if it ensures their political survival.

I trust the Council will carefully consider the values of the Brisbane community in order to make a decision that best accommodates these values. In particular, please look closely at the Renewable Alternative Energy Plan, which

- Is compatible with our General Plan, and reflects the community’s stance on environmental sustainability;
- Drastically reduces threats to health and safety;
- Envisions a cutting-edge use of this land for a positive purpose: generation of energy for Brisbane and beyond;
- Can provide sustainable financial benefit to Brisbane as long as we identify tenants who understand the importance and potential of such a partnership;
- Reduces the impact of development on Brisbane, particularly in comparison to the population growth that would result from implementation of either of the two DSPs.

Thank you for your service to our city.

Yours truly,
Ceci Herrmann
Brisbane resident