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Brisbane to study Baylands: Environmental issues tied to transformative proposal

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Brisbane officials will take another bite in their ongoing attempt to digest the variety of issues associated with a development standing to nearly triple the city's current size.

The Brisbane City Council is slated to host a study session Thursday, March 16, addressing environmental issues related to the proposed construction of more than 4,000 new homes at the Baylands.

The transformative project has been the source of much contentious debate since being introduced more than a decade ago, eventually giving way to a drawn out public analysis by officials, residents, regional housing advocates and environmentalists.

For discussion at the upcoming meeting, officials are expected to take a deeper look at ways the proposed development, which also includes almost 7 million square feet of commercial space, will impact hydrology, seismology, wind patterns and more.

Considering the project's magnitude, officials have elected to take it on through a series of narrowly focused discussions rather than attempt to weigh the entire mass at once, said Brisbane Community Development Director John Swiecki.

"If you look at the map and the physical size of the Baylands, it is literally bigger than the rest of the city," he said. "Just in terms of its size and scope, it's huge. That makes it somewhat complicated and the city and residents are very sensitive to that."

With wind patterns on the docket, Swiecki said windsurfers, kiteboarders and water sport enthusiasts could attend Thursday's meeting to raise concerns regarding ways the development might harm their pastime.

No decision is slated to be made though, as a host of smaller public discussion are being held monthly in anticipation of officials taking an expected vote later this summer, said Swiecki.

"It's a long and thorough process and the community will not feel compelled to be rushed," said Swiecki, of the small city comprised of around 4,000 residents in the shadow of San Bruno Mountain.

Even a pending decision by the City Council would likely not be binding, said Swiecki, who believes ultimately Brisbane voters will be offered the final say on approving the project through a ballot initiative which may be floated next year.

Further compounding the concerns related to the development is soil contamination spread through the 660-acre site, which was the former home to a rail yard and municipal fill.

Beyond that, fears associated with the threat of inviting more traffic congestion to the area adjacent to Highway 101, concerns over polluting the Bay as well as balancing the region's appetite for more housing and jobs must be considered by officials.

"These things all kind of come to a bit of a confluence here and that will be what the council has to sort out," Swiecki said.

Universal Paragon Corporation, the real estate development company which proposed the project, believes it could be a tremendous asset in offering a variety of badly-needed amenities to the Peninsula.

"By placing jobs and housing in a concentrated development pattern adjacent to the most underutilized station on the commuter rail line, we are able to assist a region in meeting its goal for lowering the amount of out-of-town trips for each locally produced job," said Jonathan Scharfman, general manager for the developer.

While also preserving a substantial portion of the project for open space and wildlife, Scharfman said he considers the project ideal for a long underused and formerly abused slice of land.

Leora Tanjuacto, of the San Mateo County Housing Leadership Council, also agreed her organization sees the project as a chance to take a substantial chunk out of the chasm between the region's wealth of jobs and dearth of housing.

"Right now it's more crucial than ever to welcome families into our communities and neighborhoods," she said in an email. "Building housing is the best way of saying, 'you're welcome here.' And given its location on Caltrain, and proximity to jobs in Brisbane and South San Francisco, the Brisbane Baylands is an ideal place to build new homes."

Swiecki though indicated he believed the project as proposed may be a bit too ambitious to garner the support it ultimately may need from Brisbane residents.

"The scale and number of residential units does not engender a lot of community support," he said.

Scharfman said hopefully the community can be persuaded to understand the perks he believes the project could offer to the entire region.

"There are some difficult choices that need to be made in that town," he said. "Do they want to be known as the town that has the garbage dump? The town that has the old rail yard? The town that has the gravel pit? Or do they want to be known as the exciting new home to 21st-century innovators who want to bring their investments and people to the community? These are some tough choices and they are not easy for small towns to make."

The Brisbane City Council meets 7:30 p.m. Thursday, March 16, in City Hall, 50 Park Place.

austin@smdailyjournal.com

(650) 344-5200 ext. 105



A rendering of the Brisbane Baylands development to be discussed Thursday by city officials.