

Baylands due for further study

Brisbane officials approve fiscal analysis as concerns over local control persist

By Austin Walsh Daily Journal staff Jan 18, 2018

Against mounting pressure to approve housing at the Baylands, Brisbane officials showed a willingness to further study allowing development at the heavily-watched site, but on their own terms.

The Brisbane City Council approved an economic report analyzing the potential costs and revenue opportunities generated by building between about 1,000 and 2,200 homes along the Bayshore, according to video of the Tuesday, Jan. 16, meeting.

The amount set for examination is a significant reduction from the 4,400 units proposed by Universal Paragon Corporation, bolstering Brisbane officials' commitment to preserving local control through the development process.

The city's authority in approving the size and scope of any potential project at the 660-acre site, which was the former home to a rail yard and municipal fill, was frequently addressed during the meeting.

"Any development must be done in a way that is safe, responsible and best for Brisbane," said former mayor Lori Liu, joining a chorus of community members largely criticizing housing proposed at the site abutting the county's northern border and Highway 101.

Concerns regarding safety and the adequacy of the area to accommodate residential development were raised most commonly by development critics, who claim the soil contamination at the Baylands is so severe that future residents would be threatened.

“If we are forced — and it looks like we are being forced — to approve some level of housing, we need to make sure it is conditional on every safety issue,” said resident Michelle Salmon.

The comments come in the wake of a report from City Manager Clay Holstine claiming state lawmakers last year considered a bill designed to streamline the developer’s proposal, stripping the power of local officials.

While the draft legislation did not make it to a vote, Holstine’s report raises the likelihood that a similar effort could return unless Brisbane officials show a willingness to approve some housing at the site.

Universal Paragon Corporation’s desire to build 4,400 housing units and 7 million square feet of commercial space makes the potential development the largest on the Peninsula.

Current site underutilization when paired with proximity to San Francisco and Silicon Valley job centers as well as public transportation makes the Baylands an ideal location for housing in an area starved for such development, advocates claim.

Over the past year, the site has become the epicenter of a regional battle between those claiming Brisbane should help offset an imbalance between available jobs and homes, and locals seeking to preserve their community interests.

Emotions around the issue ramped up when regional legislators stepped in, as reflected in the sharply-worded report from Holstine. Perhaps the tipping point came when San Francisco Supervisor Jane Kim suggested her city annex Brisbane to facilitate the housing construction.

Such talks gained little traction, but notions of Brisbane handing over the Baylands to a larger local agency persist, as reflected in comments during the City Council meeting.

Former mayor Ray Miller and former City Council candidate Tony Verreos both suggested it may be worth it for officials to seek opportunities to pass off the site to another jurisdiction.

“Let the county deal with remediation, pressure and fiscal matters,” said Miller, who also proposed offering the site to Daly City officials.

A consultant hired by the city to assist Brisbane officials navigate challenges posed by Baylands development suggested though the county’s appetite for taking on such an endeavor is limited.

Rather than seek out opportunities to cede local authority, councilmembers instead moved ahead with an intention to shape any future development, while acknowledging the likelihood that residents may have a final say in the matter.

Mayor Clark Conway said he believed the Baylands development should ultimately be subject to a voters initiative, while noting the path for building at the site must be cleared through a general plan amendment.

“Major land use decisions should go to the ballot, as I have said on numerous occasions,” said Conway.

To tighten Brisbane’s grasp on the issue, city officials were directed to craft a fiscal analysis of a project which, at its largest, is comprised of about half the housing units currently proposed. The report, also set to consider between 2 million to 6 million square feet of commercial or nonresidential space, is slated to return before councilmembers Thursday, March 1.

For his part, Conway said he believed the report will give locals and residents a better sense of what development at the Baylands may mean for Brisbane's bottom line.

"We have to know what the consequences would be for the city financially," he said.

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