

IN THE NEWS



Campus Bay, an 87-acre plot of land, is polluted with over 100 chemicals. A developer plans to build 4,000 housing units, 20,000 square foot grocery store with about 30 acres of parks and open space. Wednesday, Dec. 9, 2020 in Richmond, Calif.

Paul Kuroda / Special to The Chronicle

Richmond council greenlights plans for housing development on toxic site

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The Richmond City Council gave a developer permission Tuesday to move forward with plans to partially clean a toxic site polluted with more than 100 chemicals and build up to 4,000 residential units and a 20,000-square-foot grocery store.

The vote — four yes votes and two no votes — resulted in the final passage of an ordinance permitting the project at 1400 S. 47th Street — and eliminated what many activists saw as a last chance to prevent the site's development.

The 86-acre property known as the Zeneca site, just east of Marina Bay and west of Interstate 580, has undergone cleanup for years but critics worry danger to future residents will remain.

Mayor Tom Butt, who voted for the project, told The Chronicle last week that the project would bring much needed housing and economic development to the city. Vice Mayor Nathaniel Bates,

who also voted in favor, said he fully supported the project after hearing from the developer that Richmond workers would be included in the construction.

Councilman Melvin Willis, who opposed the ordinance, expressed concerns about building housing on a toxic site — echoing what many activists and residents have said.

“I wish we weren’t even talking about it,” he said, adding that the development would cause a “huge impact” to residents in the future.

Activists and city residents said plans to clean the property are insufficient and instead, the city should urge a full clean-up before building housing. Several people have said they will pursue legal action if the plan moves forward.

Environmental scientists say thorough cleanups are preferable for land being used for housing. Thomas Azwell, an environmental scientist at UC Berkeley’s CITRIS Institute, told The Chronicle last week that cleaning up to the “highest level possible” is always preferable.

“I always ask the developer, would you live there when it’s done? Are you going to buy one of those homes? I think that is a good metric,” he said.

On Tuesday, 28 people spoke during public comment — many of whom opposed the development.

Supporters included labor unions, firefighters and some residents who underscored the need for more housing in a region that is in the throes of a housing crisis.

In 2019, the state’s Department of Toxic Substances Control released a “final cleanup plan” that would only excavate some contaminated soil and build barriers in areas where the soil would remain untouched. It would also include groundwater treatment and a soil vapor extraction system. The DTSC has sole jurisdiction of the site’s clean-up.

That year, the City Council voted to support the DTSC’s plan, reversing their earlier decision in 2018 to call for a full clean-up.

The site has a complicated history involving environmental concerns.

In 1897, Stauffer Chemical Co. built a plant on the property to manufacture sulfuric acid by roasting pyrite ores, according to the California Department of Toxic Substances Control.

The company dumped iron pyrite cinders into the marsh and later manufactured fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides there. After corporate mergers in the 1980s, Zeneca Corp. bought the plant, and then closed it in 1997. The company is now known as AstraZeneca — a pharmaceutical and biopharmaceutical company based in England.

In 1998, the California water board named the Zeneca site a toxic “hot spot.” At the time, it was one of the 10 most polluted sites in the Bay Area. Chemicals there include benzene, arsenic and polychlorinated biphenyls.

AstraZeneca spent \$20 million in 2002 to offset the acidic soils, move contaminated dirt and cap the land. In 2009, the Department of Toxic Substances Control fined AstraZeneca nearly \$250,000. In 2019, the agency fined AstraZeneca \$25,000 and ordered it to secure the site by fixing breaches in the fence and gates and to regularly patrol the site.

Cherokee Simeon Venture I LLC — which is affiliated with AstraZeneca — now owns the site.

The development project currently proposed for the site from Shopoff Realty Investments and Hilco Redevelopment Partners will include — in addition to the homes — up to 50,000 square feet of retail space and \$20 million in one-time community benefits.

The Southern California developer must still submit building designs to the city's design review board for approval, as well as apply for building permits.

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