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More work needed: Seaport San Diego project gets mixed reviews at public workshop



The view of the proposed Seaport San Diego project as seen from a relocated Ruocco Park on the peninsula where Embarcadero Marina Park North is today. The 500-foot observation tower, event center and other hotels contemplated in the project can be seen in the background.(Courtesy, Seaport San Diego. Master Architect: CallisonRTKL Inc.; Iconic Tower: BIG; Landscape: OJB.)

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BY JENNIFER VAN GROVE

It's not back to the drawing board, but the developer proposing to redo downtown's broader Central Embarcadero with hotels, attractions and new marinas will need to revise — and perhaps even eliminate — some key elements of the mega project known as Seaport San Diego.

Thursday, Port of San Diego Commissioners expressed opposing views of 1HWY1's Seaport project during a 4.5-hour-long workshop where public concerns about the overall size of the project, the developer's fraught relationship with local fishermen and the volume of the project's boat slips dominated the conversation. Still, the general tenor of the discussion suggested a path forward where the road to approval appeared blocked just a few months ago.

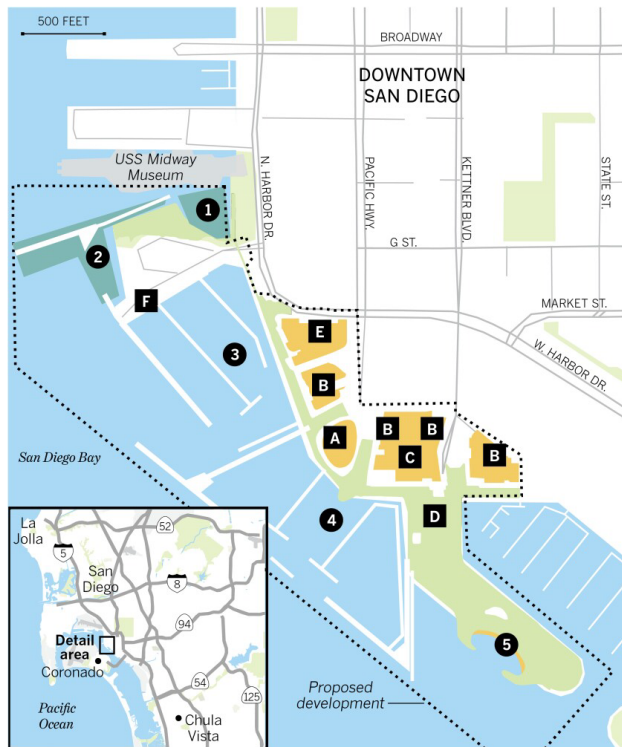
"I think that we continue to move down the right path," Port Commissioner Rafael Castellanos said. "I know it's controversial and a lot of folks aren't going to like it. But there are a lot of folks who don't just

like it, they love it. And so I'm not entirely there yet, but I'm supportive of the vision. I'd like to see the transformative project come to fruition on this site."

Like Castellanos, Commissioners Dan Malcolm and Ann Moore said they see the project — and its more than 2,000 hotel rooms — as an appropriate fit for downtown's urban waterfront.

Seaport San Diego project

Developer 1HWY1 is proposing a \$3.5 billion project that would redo San Diego's Central Embarcadero. The development program includes hotels, parks and open space, shops, new piers and marinas, an event center, a blue-tech campus, a fish-processing facility and underground parking.



Land uses

- A: 500-foot observation tower
- B: Hotels of varying price levels, entertainment, restaurant and retail
- C: Event center operated by AEG
- D: New Ruocco Park
- E: "Blue-tech" campus with office space, a school and an aquarium
- F: Fish-processing facility

Sources: Port of San Diego; Nextzen; OpenStreetMap

Water zones

- 1: Midway Cove Marina, recreational berthing, water taxis, harbor cruise and seasonal watercraft
- 2: G Street Marina, sport fishing, aquaculture, whale watching and dock & dine
- 3: Tuna Harbor, a commercial fishing marina
- 4: 100% Corner Marina, recreational berthing, water taxis and dock & dine
- 5: Urban beach

MICHELLE GILCHRIST U-T

The remaining four commissioners are not completely sold on the big-picture vision. Some are still struggling to make sense of high-rises in place of today's quaint Seaport Village. There's also the issue of parked boats blocking views of Coronado.

"I remain troubled ... by the water views and the amount of boats in the water," said Commissioner Michael Zucchet. "It still feels like a lot to me, because when you take into account the Tuna Harbor fishing boats and then the Marriott Marina on the other side ... then (you're) basically filling in the rest on the waterside with the 100% Corner Marina. I struggle with that a little bit."

All, however, are in agreement that there's more work to be done before they can give 1HWY1 their blessing. Each commissioner noted, for instance, that the developer must rectify grievances with the commercial fishermen who operate out of Tuna Harbor and Thursday spoke against the proposed facilities on the G Street Mole.

The lengthy back-and-forth comes nearly six years after 1HWY1 was selected by the port, which oversees the region's tidelands, to remake the expansive area that includes Seaport Village and follows the bay from Embarcadero Marina Park North to the G Street Mole, just south of the USS Midway Museum. The agency and the developer

have, since October 2017, been actively negotiating lease and development terms for the expansive site, although the board has yet to OK the project.

1HWY1 is headed by Yehudi "Gaf" Gaffen, Jeff "JJ" Jacobs (son of Irwin Jacobs) and Jeff Essakow.

In late December, the team submitted a formal project description, which the board did not review favorably, at its March 8 meeting. Thursday, the developer returned to the board with edits, including wider promenades along the water, fewer boat slips and a smaller blue-tech building.

As it stands, Seaport San Diego includes 2,058 hotel rooms spread across seven properties, 229,213 square feet of retail and restaurant space, new piers and marinas creating room for 265 boat slips, an event center that would be operated by AEG, a 225,000 square-foot blue-tech office campus, a fish-processing facility, an urban beach, more than 2,100 parking spaces, and 16 acres of parks and open space.

1HWY1 is now planning to make major changes in rapid order as it seeks to secure preliminary project approval later this year.

"I was very encouraged by yesterday's meeting and the commissioners' comments," Gaffen told the Union-Tribune. "I think it was really clear to me what the pathway for (the project) is. I see three things that I think need to be addressed before we get the final votes to move forward."

To start, the developer will reconsider its total slip count and even weigh removing altogether the problematic marina at the foot of Pacific Highway, or what's being called 100% Corner Marina. Most of the commissioners pushed back on the idea of introducing boats to an area where there are none today.

"There are just too many slips still," Commissioner Ann Moore said. "(The slips) impede the water views along the Embarcadero. ... I'm concerned that having all of these slips, and the piers, could really create some issues of perhaps being intimidating for people, and really restrict the use and enjoyment of the waterfront to a small group of people."

In a similar vein, 1HWY1 will work to ensure that the project affords equal attention to underserved communities — instead of just catering to boat owners or people who can pay to take in the views from high-priced vantage points.

Perhaps most significantly, Gaffen said he believes he can find common ground with the San Diego Fishermen's Working Group.

The nonprofit group, which has a long-standing relationship with the developer, outlined in a presentation a number of logistical issues with the Seaport San Diego project, as proposed. Among other concerns, the fish-processing facility is too small, the restaurant proposed for the top story of the building isn't needed, and G Street Mole's parking and traffic management plan is poorly designed, Peter Halmay, who is president of the Fishermen's Working Group, told commissioners.

The sentiments were echoed by a number of public speakers, who either called in, left voicemails or appeared in person to testify on the necessity of protecting San Diego's commercial fishing industry.

The coordinated opposition seemed to come as a surprise to some commissioners.

"I heard (Seaport project executive Alex Buggy) stand up here today and talk about the work they've been doing with the commercial fishermen and the association. I was fully expecting that I was going to have Mr. Halmay and others come up here and talk about how happy they are with ... the proposal, with the concept," Commissioner Frank Urtasun said. "And that's not what I heard. I don't know what the other commissioners heard, but I didn't hear that at all. I heard concern after concern after concern."

Seaport San Diego has the support of several elected leaders, business association executives and union leaders. Julie Coker, CEO of the San Diego Tourism Authority, told commissioners she appreciated the

project's mix of uses and said it would further cement San Diego's reputation as a top tourism destination.

The project has also drawn the ire of downtown residents and waterfront preservation groups.

"This plan is incredible in its audacity: they want to wall off existing hotels that the port has already allowed to wall off downtown," Sandra Hajjar wrote in a public comment letter. "This 1HWY1 plan is cold and overdone and doesn't exemplify San Diego. It may as well be Shanghai. Seaport Village is quintessentially San Diego."

Commissioners will next consider project financials and lease terms at an August board meeting that is closed to the public. Staff expects to return to the board in open session, and potentially seek a vote on preliminary approval, after the developer submits an updated project description and other documents, as required by its contractual agreement with the port.