

SFGate.com

Print This Article

Back to

Article

SFGate.com

Plans by Cargill to build homes on salt-flat acreage alarms some

Jonathan Curiel, Chronicle Staff Writer

Thursday, November 1, 2007



The owner of one of the largest undeveloped swaths of bay shoreline says it is considering building houses on the land - a controversial idea opposed by environmentalists who say the property should be restored to its natural state and protected.

Cargill Inc. uses the 1,433-acre site on the edge of San Francisco Bay in Redwood City to produce commercial salt, but John Bruno, a spokesman for a joint venture between Cargill and a real estate development firm, told The Chronicle that the corporation is studying the possibility of building housing there.

The land is just southeast of Bair Island, a marshy, 2,600-acre restoration project that is part of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. On that former salt pond, where Redwood City voters in 1982 forbade development, harbor seals have found a place to sunbathe and rare species like the salt harvest mouse thrive.

Although Cargill has not actually produced any plans for the nearby 1,433-acre site, environmentalists say they would fight to prevent Cargill from getting permits to build residences there. Instead, they say the land should be used to further the state's goal of restoring the thousands of acres of bay wetlands destroyed over the past 200 years.

The idea of building housing on the land is supported by at least one local official, a key member of the Redwood City Planning Commission who says the city has an immense need for housing and amenities like playing fields and trails. And the executive director of the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission, which has jurisdiction over land within 100 feet of the bay's shoreline, said Cargill could pursue a development plan if it first restored at least half of the site to a natural setting.

Cargill is phasing out its salt production on the land and wants to convert it into some type of mixed development, including some housing. For the past year, Redwood City Industrial Saltworks - a joint venture between Cargill and a real estate development firm called DMB Associates - has solicited comments from Redwood City residents on what they want Cargill to do with the property.

A Match Made in Heaven

Come to the new Cellar360 in Ghirardelli Square to where you'll find chocolate isn't the only decadent treat.

CELLAR360
SAN FRANCISCO

More than 6,000 people have responded through mailings and comments during the company's forums, "and the vast majority of what we've heard is that people are looking for a mixture of uses, and that runs the gamut from housing to parks to bay trails," said Bruno, general manager of Redwood City Industrial Saltworks.

Bruno wouldn't specify the type of housing Cargill envisions nor what percentage of land the housing would occupy, but any development is opposed by groups such as Save the Bay. That group recently started a campaign to protect the last remaining undeveloped properties that ring the bay.

"It's not the place to put housing," said the group's executive director, David Lewis. "If Cargill thinks this can be approved, they're living in the past."

Cargill's Redwood City property is zoned "tidal plain," meaning the corporation would have to get an exemption from the Redwood City Planning Commission to pursue any development.

Before it does, Cargill would have to restore at least 50 percent of the area to natural habitat under state laws governing bay salt ponds, said Will Travis, head of the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission.

"Our position is that when you take a salt pond and use it for something other than salt making, a substantial portion of it should be restored to the bay or wetlands. The issue of what the (rest of the) property can be used for is the call of local government," Travis said.

And Lewis said the company would face additional development hurdles under the federal Clean Water Act, which he said prohibits former waterways from being filled with development if there are alternatives to put the development in another area. And, Lewis said, state water quality regulations would also severely limit what Cargill could build on the site, which has been used for salt production since 1901.

Development in that area has been controversial since the first home at Redwood Shores was built in 1969. Dozens of office developments were built up to the bay shoreline - land that environmentalists said should have been restored to its natural state. That battle in part led to the campaign to protect Bair Island, which once also was eyed for development. In 2004, Redwood City voters rejected a proposed high-rise development near the bay, Marina Shores Village, which the City Council had approved.

Cargill won't formally submit a development application to Redwood City until sometime next year, Bruno said. Last month, the Minnesota corporation hired three firms - including one called Biohabitats that specializes in ecological restoration - to help develop the property. In the next few months, Cargill will hold more community meetings.

Construction probably wouldn't begin for at least several years.

The vice chairwoman of Redwood City's Planning Commission, Nancy Radcliffe, said she would favorably consider any housing plan by Cargill because Redwood City is in desperate need of residences for people who work in the Peninsula city. Such housing would reduce the number of commuters on Bay Area roads, thereby reducing car emissions and helping the environment, Radcliffe said.

"Housing would ... lessen the amount of commuters, and then you look at the affects of global warming, so it's not just a one-issue thing," Radcliffe said. "At the moment, Redwood City has a huge housing imbalance. So that's an issue that's in front of us. The less people have to commute, the better it is for the environment and for family life."

Bruno said that those who oppose any housing on the site are "by far a very small minority opinion."

But Save the Bay's Lewis and Ralph Nobles, a former Redwood City planning commissioner who heads the group Friends of Redwood City, said there is a growing sentiment that preserving environmentally sensitive land is more important than building condominiums or apartment complexes.

Cargill, Nobles said, "can't develop (its saltworks) land unless they convince the people of Redwood City that it should be housing rather than bay lands. I don't think the people of Redwood City want to put housing on a bay front that's below sea level at a time when sea levels are rising."

About 40,000 acres of wetlands rim the San Francisco Bay. Save the Bay wants Cargill to sell the property to the state or federal government so it can add the land to the national wildlife refuge. In 2002, Cargill sold 16,500 acres of commercial salt ponds to state and federal governments for \$243 million in cash and tax credits.

Even if housing is ultimately put on the property, Bruno said, it probably would be accompanied by open habitat spaces, a recreation area and other places that will reflect the area's natural setting.

Redwood City Councilman Jeff Ira said he would like a youth sports facility on the land that would "be able to host Little League and soccer tournaments and those types of things. The No. 1 complaint I hear on a regular basis is that we just don't have enough playing fields. That wouldn't require zoning changes since that's one of the few things allowed."

"There's no question we need housing," Ira said. "But do we want to build housing for housing's sake? Never. You have to do something that is a good use of the land. I think everyone wants to build open space, but how much - that's a tough question."

Online resources

For more information on redwood city industrial saltworks, the company formed by cargill real estate development firm dmb associates:

www.rcsaltworks.com

Information on cargill's operations:

www.cargill.com

Don edwards san francisco bay national wildlife refuge:

www.fws.gov/desfbay

Whom to contact

Want to share your thoughts about the development of a salt pond in Redwood City? Here are some agencies and groups that will be involved:

Bay Conservation and Development Commission: (415) 352-3600

Redwood City Planning Commission: links.sfgate.com/ZBKI

Cargill Inc.: (800) 227-4455

Redwood City Industrial Saltworks: (650) 366-0500

Save the Bay: (510) 452-9261

E-mail Jonathan Curiel at jcuriel@sfgate.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/11/01/MNAET3ET0.DTL>

This article appeared on page **A - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

San Francisco Chronicle Sections

© 2007 Hearst Communications Inc. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Contact](#)