

V and W may spell confusion in Redwood City

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The rhetorical mud is flying around Redwood City these days over competing ballot measures that could - depending on who is talking - bring development, restore wetlands or block anything from happening on a large salt flat in San Francisco Bay.

At stake in the increasingly volatile battle are 1,433 acres of salt ponds owned by Cargill Inc., which has hired a developer to come up with plans for housing on the saliferous flats just off Highway 101, near the Port of Redwood City.

Preliminary plans call for development of half of the property and wetlands restoration on the other half, but the process is on hold until Nov. 4, when residents will vote on measures W and V, which would both require an election before homes could be built.

Most of the mudslinging is over Measure W, which is backed by the environmental groups Save the Bay and Friends of Redwood City. The initiative, placed on the ballot after 6,500 residents signed a petition, would require two-thirds of the voters to approve developments on the Cargill property and in designated parks, tidal plains and open space in Redwood City.

Measure V, placed on the ballot by the City Council, applies strictly to the Cargill land and would require only that a simple majority approve development.

"The bottom line is who gets to decide whether the precious remaining open space in Redwood City is going to be destroyed," said David Lewis, executive director of Save the Bay. "We believe it should take a two-thirds vote to destroy that open space because once it is gone, it is gone forever. A majority vote could mean a massive and highly controversial project could be narrowly approved."

Private property affected

But some believe Measure W would do more harm than good. Numerous private homes and businesses would be impacted by the measure, including 41 private parcels, a church, a radio

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station, a wastewater treatment plant and a portion of Oracle's corporate headquarters.

Some of the hundreds of homeowners living on a waterway in Redwood Shores could find themselves forced by a vindictive neighbor to seek a two-thirds vote to, for instance, renovate their docks, Measure W opponents contend.

"This is a poorly written piece of legislation that duplicates a city planning process that is already in place," said Cherlene Wright, chairwoman of Citizens to Protect Redwood City, which opposes Measure W. "The stated goal is to block development on the 1,433 acres on Cargill property, but the measure doesn't say anything about restoring it. There can be no restoration of that land right now. It is private property."

Lewis said the opposition is trying to scare voters with "a bunch of lies." He said Measure W would allow property owners to do anything to their homes that they do now. The two-thirds vote would only kick in, he said, if they wanted to do something that would require a change in zoning or the general plan, like tearing down their house to build a 7-Eleven.

The battle comes at a time when land use is a huge issue in the Bay Area and nationwide. Cities are trying desperately to build housing closer to job centers and transportation, so the Redwood City site would make sense except for its location along the San Francisco Bay shoreline.

The restoration of bay wetlands has for years been a major goal of environmental groups. Saltwater marshes and mudflats were once everywhere along the edges of the bay, but at least 80 percent were diked or filled over the past century, ruining a vast, thriving ecosystem for fish, crabs, birds and unique plant life.

Former Cargill-owned salt ponds are now the keystone of a \$1 billion, 50-year wetlands restoration effort. That program, one of the most ambitious in the country, is using 16,500 acres of ponds purchased for \$100 million in 2003 by the state and federal government and private foundations.

The plan includes the restoration of marshes and beaches, the cleanup of mercury pollution from old mines, invasive-plant removal, new trails, the planting of native grasses and construction of numerous levees to prevent flooding. When completed, miles of shoreline in San Mateo, Santa Clara and Alameda counties as well as 1,400 acres in a wildlife refuge in the North Bay would be restored to as close to their natural condition as possible.

Site too expensive

The 1,433 acres of ponds in Redwood City were offered for sale by Cargill along with the other land, but government officials balked, saying it was too expensive. With little government money available, some regulators believe Cargill officials should at least be given the opportunity to develop their plan to restore some of the land.

"The voters of Redwood City are being offered these two alternatives before anybody has come up with a plan for what might happen on the property," said Will Travis, executive director of the Bay Conservation and Development Commission. "This election is putting policy and ideological positions in front of thoughtful, rational planning. We think it is better to do the planning first before you decide whether you like it or not."

Cargill and the developer, DMB Associates of Arizona, are helping fund the opposition to Measure W through a group called Citizens Against Costly Initiatives. A group of property owners that call themselves the Redwood City Seven has joined the City Council in supporting Measure V.

"Measure W divides the community, and Measure V goes to what the community is concerned about," said Mayor Rosanne Foust. "They want to have a say in what happens on the Cargill property."

Lewis accused the City Council of putting Measure V on the ballot to confuse voters, which Foust denies. Confusion, though, may be the result. After all, Redwood City will be voting in November on whether to hold a referendum on plans that don't yet exist for a salt flat that could be flooded by the rising bay water before anybody gets around to restoring it.

Measures at a glance

Measure W would require property owners covered by the measure - which includes land designated for agriculture, parks or wetlands - to obtain approval from two-thirds of Redwood City voters for developments that require zoning changes or amendments to the general plan. It is backed by the environmental organization Save the Bay and the citizen's group Friends of Redwood City.

Measure V would require future development on property owned by Cargill Inc. - about 1,450 acres of mostly salt ponds east of Highway 101 and south of Seaport Boulevard - to be approved by a majority of Redwood City voters. It is backed by the City Council of Redwood City.

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