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Growth Cities Central County: Citizens help plan Concord naval station's future

East Bay Business Times - by [Marie-Anne Hogarth](#) Staff reporter

It's crunch time in Concord as city officials get ready to make several key decisions for land use at the former naval weapons station, a 5,028-acre site that is considered by many to be the largest remaining developable piece of land in the Bay Area.

A committee of 21 citizens picked to represent Concord and the region will select a plan for reuse of the station next month. They will focus on vital questions that will not only define the site's development but shape Central Contra Costa's future:

- How urban will it be?
- How affordable?
- Will there be a large urban park, a university or a "world class" sports stadium?

The recommendations these residents make - assuming they are approved by the City Council in January and then adopted as part of a formal plan next May or June - will direct developers as they build out the project over the next three decades.

They will need to pass muster both with state and federal environmental agencies, which require mitigation for environmental impacts, as well as get the tacit approval of Navy officials and developers looking to generate profit.

The Navy had given Concord until Sept. 20 to adopt a plan for the base. The city said it needed more time and had requested an extension. At press time, the city had not heard from the Navy on an extension, according to Michael Wright, director of the reuse project.

Navy selling, not giving away, land

Unlike the base redevelopments at Alameda and Treasure Island, where cities received the land for free, the Navy is looking to sell the land in Concord to the developer for fair market value. It would incorporate the city's plan in whatever development agreement it reaches with builders.

"The Navy has to give preference to the community reuse plans," explained Wright. "What the Navy could say is that ... they feel they cannot receive reasonable value for the property. They could elect not to dispose of it."

Still, Wright adds, "In the end of the day all of these things are going to get worked out because the Navy does really desire to get rid of the property."

Some stakeholder groups don't think the city should give up control so easily.

"Why hasn't the city applied to receive the property?" asked Eve Bach, an economist for Arc Ecology, a nonprofit social justice group focused on base redevelopments around California. "They would have a lot more control over what would happen on the property if they did."

Mayor Bill Shinn responds that the city is "not a developer," and "not in the building business."

On the table are two visions for the site that differ both in the amount of development they involve and how that development would be spread over the site.

One of them, a "concentration and conservation" plan, has slightly less development - 10,040 residential units rather than 11,950 residential units - and concentrates the development around the North Concord BART station and along Willow Pass Road.

The other plan, a "clustered villages" plan calls for residential developments along the west side of Mount Diablo Creek.

The "concentration and conservation" plan is 73 percent open space, and the "clustered villages" is 64 percent open space. Both include transit-oriented development close to BART, a hotel, retail space and offices. There would also be a college campus, a golf course and sports tournament facilities.

Both plans received applause from interest groups, including groups that have been pushing for 80 percent open space.

For now, there is support on the citizens advisory board for the "clustered villages" alternative.

"It has more jobs," said Ellen Williams, a committee member and the chairwoman of the [Greater Concord Chamber of Commerce](#). "The other thing that I like as a transportation professional, (is that) the higher degree of development gives you a better shot at giving the city intra-city transit."

"The villages plan stretches out the plan along Port Chicago (Highway)," said Dan Helix, who chairs the citizens advisory committee and is a former Concord mayor. "In my mind it will be an important part of the city. The city advised us, 'don't give us two Concord.'"

Meanwhile, members of the [Community Coalition for a Sustainable Concord](#), which includes 20 nonprofits, worry that the plan has too much residential development and would provide insufficient density for public transportation. The group includes the Concord Naval Weapons Neighborhood Alliance, with a mailing list of 1,300 families in the city and the region.

"There's a real concern that there is still too much low density in the clustered villages plan," said Amie Fishman, executive director of the East Bay

Housing Organizations and one of the coalition's leaders. "Thirty-nine percent low density is not looking toward the future."

Some coalition members also worry that city staff members and leaders haven't truly taken into account some of the constraints of the property.

Seth Adams, director of land programs for Save Mount Diablo, says that one of the plans calls for a park on a part of the site that has a wetland, which would require a lot of mitigation from developers.

"There are all kinds of things that will have to be mitigated," Wright said. "When developers bid on the property, they will know these things, and they will make business decisions to do restoration, to create additional green belts, and they will factor all of that into what they are willing to bid."

A new coalition of regional leaders has been brought together by Save Mount Diablo and the Contra Costa Council. The group, which includes engineers, economic analysts, representatives from Cal State East Bay and the Contra Costa Community College District, as well as the [Home Builders Association of Northern California](#), hopes the city will call on their technical expertise throughout the conversation.

Another point of contention is that many of these groups believe the East Bay Regional Park District should run whatever park gets created at the base, and they worry the city is keeping the district at arm's length.

"Unless the East Bay Regional Park District takes on the urban regional park, people won't feel confident that there is a deep commitment to open space," Fishman said.

Mayor Shinn, who just won the endorsement of the open-space advocates in his bid for re-election, says there is some old distrust between city officials and the regional parks, but the park district remains a player.

Homeless services have made proposals

Meanwhile, the city is focused on reaching a legally binding agreement with a dozen providers of homeless services who have made proposals for the base under the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Process. This agreement would need to be approved by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Groups that have been working together with nonprofit builders want to bring affordable housing projects to the base, something that the mayor believes is complicating the equation, since the nonprofit developers aren't technically part of the federal process.

"I've tried to tell them, Bill Shinn advocates for both homeless and affordable housing," Shinn said.

He also worried that the projects some of these nonprofit developers are presenting may detract from the market value of the project. "The bottom line is the dollar," Shinn said. "Who will pay for that?"

The Navy would also donate land through the project for public amenities, such as a university and a sports stadium, but that also is an unknown.

In the meantime, some Concord residents have started looking to others who can help make their dream for the weapons station land a reality.

Helix, whose dream for Concord is a great library, said he and others are talking to some of the East Bay's wealthiest residents about this and other projects.

"We have some people who are standing by and who are interested in committing significant sums," Helix said. "There is somebody who is talking in the neighborhood of \$50 million ... to build part of a stadium and other facilities related to the university."

Who wants what

Space:

- Cal State East Bay 415 acres
- Center for Adaptive Learning 2 to 3 acres
- Contra Costa fire and sheriff 120 acres
- Contra Costa Veterans Foundation 40 acres
- East Bay Regional Parks District 3,000 acres
- Habitat for Humanity 4 acres
- Mercy Housing California 6 acres
- Total acres requested 3,588 acres
- Total acres available 5,000 acres

Housing:

- East Bay Asian Local Development Corp. - Rubicon Programs Inc. 300 units
- Eden Housing and Shelter Inc. 250 units
- Resources for Community Development - Contra Costa Interfaith/Health Services 200 units
- Diablo Creek Village-Mercy Housing and Lutheran Social Services 20 units
- Total housing units requested 790 units
- Total proposed units for site: 10,040 to 11,950 units

Other groups with requests:

- Mid-Peninsula Housing Coalition and First Place for Youth
- Anka Concord Enterprise Center
- Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano
- Loaves and Fishes

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