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Labor, environmental, neighborhood groups raise questions on weapons station plan

By Paul Thissen
Contra Costa Times

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CONCORD — City leaders hope the plans for a sweeping development of homes, offices, schools and parks on the shuttered inland portion of the Concord Naval Weapons Station are nearly complete.

But a coalition of interest groups says there is more work to be done before the environmental review is complete and plans can move forward.

And one member of that group, unhappy with the plan approved a year ago, says unless the City Council changes course it will likely file a lawsuit or a ballot measure to force the council's hand.

The city completed its final environmental impact report this month. Two public City Council hearings are scheduled on the plan Feb. 9 and 23. If the report is approved, the city would start making the zoning and policy changes necessary to give the plans the force of law.

Members of the Coalition for a Sustainable Concord say the environmental report is much improved from previous drafts, but there is still work to be done.

"They really have to seriously consider traffic and air quality and climate issues, and we feel that these are inextricably linked," said Amie Fishman, executive director of the East Bay Housing Organization, which is part of the coalition. "If they neglect to put in place measures that match housing needs and jobs "... it's problematic."

Other concerns include the protection of wildlife and the restoration of Mount Diablo Creek, said Seth Adams of Save Mount Diablo, which is also a coalition member.

In its responses to the 46 comment letters, the city writes that the thousands of pages of review are more than adequate for this stage of planning, and that more specific mitigation measures will be set up as specific projects are proposed.

In January 2009, the council selected the "clustered villages" plan, which includes dense development near the North Concord BART station and three smaller "villages" along the southwest border of the property in the area known as bunker city.

That plan would add as many as 12,272 housing units, 28,800 residents and bring as many as 26,530 jobs on the inland portion of the 5,028-acre former U.S. Navy munitions depot in the northeast part Concord, extending to Highway 4 and the border with Pittsburg.

One member of the coalition, the Concord Naval Weapons Station Neighborhood Alliance, has said it wants the City Council to change its plans and select the "concentration and conservation" alternative, a second option that would set all development around the North Concord BART station and leave the rest of the base as open space.

The final environmental review names the concentration and conservation plan as environmentally superior, but notes that the council can pick another option based on non-environmental considerations.

If the city does not switch to the conservation and conservation plan, the alliance will likely file a lawsuit or referendum, said Kathy Gleason of the neighborhood group.

"We've talked and talked and I think we're done talking with the city. Nothing changes," Gleason said. "I think we're beyond frustration."

Michael Wright, the city's weapons station reuse director, said litigation or a referendum could cause delays and have unintended consequences. The concentration and conservation plan leaves much of the "bunker city" area as open space, and Wright said it's not clear that the East Bay Regional Park District would be willing to take on the responsibility of cleaning up the area.

"There's a fair amount of consensus that's been built up around the (clustered villages plan) and I'm hoping maybe calmer heads will prevail," Wright said.

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Other members of the coalition, including the Greenbelt Alliance, East Bay Housing Organization and Save Mount Diablo, said they were not at the point of contemplating court or ballot action.

"I think there are ways we can try and resolve some of this, and I'm cautiously optimistic," said Melissa Hippard, campaigns director for the Greenbelt Alliance, which is also a coalition member.

The City Council should ask that the environmental review be changed to reassure the coalition — and residents — that effective mitigation measures would be put in place.

The city is close, she said, "but they're not there yet."

Contact Paul Thissen at 925-943-8163.

If you go

- WHAT: Public hearings on the environmental impact report for the Concord Naval Weapons Station
- WHEN: 6:30 p.m. Feb. 9 at the Concord City Council chamber, Civic Center, 1950 Parkside Drive, Concord; and 6:30 p.m. Feb. 23 at Concord Senior Center, 2727 Parkside Circle, Concord.

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