

The Almanac

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Editorial: Major development decisions ahead for Menlo Park

Despite the economic downturn, upcoming development decisions will test the Menlo Park City Council like never before, as it takes up the huge Menlo Gateway project proposed by David Bohannon, completes work on the downtown "visioning" process, and chooses whether to take a position on the Cargill project that would add 12,000 new homes and 30,000 residents to reclaimed salt ponds on the bay lands just north of Bayfront Park.

The council has already invested a lot of time in the "visioning" process, scheduled to wind up in the fall of 2010. The plan could open up a stretch of sites housing now-vacant auto showrooms and other properties to a mix of residential and retail development that would substantially change the look and feel of this part of the city. And like all development decisions in Menlo Park, it will be controversial.

And then there is the Bohannon proposal.

This is a project that some say belongs in a large city, such as San Francisco or Los Angeles. With three eight-story office towers topping out at 140 feet, a companion 230-room hotel and fitness center, and parking garages to accommodate its 2,500 workers, this project is off the scale for Menlo Park.

The 16-acre site is located near Marsh Road and Bayfront Expressway and is now zoned for industrial use. If the requested rezoning is approved, it would increase the value of the property from \$19.8 million to \$47.5 million. The construction project would be the most ambitious ever undertaken in Menlo Park. Its estimated \$363 million price tag is around the construction cost of AT&T Park, and in terms of floor area, it is roughly the same size as the Sun Microsystems complex on Bayfront Expressway in Menlo Park.

But beyond its super size is the question of how Menlo Park residents and city officials will react to Mr. Bohannon's carefully designed use of this ancestral property, first developed by his grandfather in the mid-20th century. The site is in an area that is off the radar screen for most Menlo Park residents, who primarily use Willow Road to reach Belle Haven and the Dumbarton Bridge.

Balancing the project's size and impact is sure to test the mettle of every City Council member, who must decide whether the 11,000 additional car trips per day and other environmental impacts are worth the revenue the project will bring to the city. The environmental impact report concludes that a great majority of vehicle trips would occur east of U.S. 101. But when coupled with the approval of the Cargill project in Redwood City, the cumulative impact on U.S. 101 could bring on perpetual gridlock.

The City Council will have to decide whether the expected \$1 million to \$2 million a year the city would receive in various taxes and fees makes up for the impact of nearly 1 million square feet of office and hotel space.

Mr. Bohannon, a Menlo Park resident whose family has a wide array of real estate holdings, including the Hillsdale Shopping Center in San Mateo, is doing everything he can to inform city officials and residents about

the merits of his project. He says he intends to seek LEED certification for his buildings, and might be amenable to providing a shuttle service to downtown to answer critics who note that the project is not accessible for cyclists or pedestrians.

He has held explanatory public hearings and taken a survey whose findings are positive. Leaders in Menlo Park's Belle Haven neighborhood, which is near the project, are on record as favoring the project. The neighborhood could receive some public benefits if the city negotiates a share of the hotel's revenue or receives other funds in return for approving the project.

The comment period on Menlo Gateway's environmental impact report ends at 5:30 p.m. on Monday, Sept. 21. For more information, visit tinyurl.com/menlogateway. Copies of the report are also available at the Menlo Park Library or the city administration building.

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