

# Viewpoint

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SF BUSINESS TIMES | MARCH 5-12, 2010

## Our View

# Get all the facts on saltworks plan making decisions

**S**tarting with the facts, and letting them steer you toward a conclusion, is usually the best path for making a decision.

But it's not the usual trajectory for Bay Area development battles, where competing sides tend to stake out their positions first, then assemble the facts to fit them later. The latest potential project to be on the receiving end of this "shoot, ready, aim" approach is the proposed massive redevelopment of Redwood City's century-old saltworks.

Developer DMB has been racking up endorsements from business-friendly groups like SamCEDA and major Peninsula employers like Electronic Arts. Opponents, led by environmental groups, last week rolled out a letter signed by 92 current and former elected officials from around the region effectively calling for the project to be strangled at birth.

Wilfully unnoticed by both sides: They don't have enough facts yet to reasonably judge a plan to put up to 12,000 homes and 1 million square feet of offices on two square miles. Neither do the rest of us, because an environmental impact report that lies at the heart of the planning process has yet to be approved.

It hasn't been completed.

Or started, for that matter.

In fact, a firm to produce the EIR has yet to be selected.

So it is premature in the extreme to pretend that any of us have the necessary facts to decide whether this project's benefits outweigh its faults — though at first glance, it has plenty of both. The EIR, certain to be suitably massive and detailed for such a huge undertaking, can be expected to be a good starting point for separating the facts from the fictions, an opportunity for both proponents and opponents to marshal their best arguments.

In favor of the development, those would go something like this: With the Peninsula a job hub in its own right, the economic environment needs to be considered equally with the physical one. Thousands of homes will be needed near these jobs over the coming decades to ensure the region continues to draw the best and the brightest. There's nothing pristine about this site: It's been used for drying out salt since 1901. And we'd only build on half of it, restoring the rest to its original wetlands.

Half's not nearly enough, opponents will retort. This is an unparalleled opportunity to restore a key part of the bay to its natural state, to actually reverse the degradation that has seen the bay's size reduced by a third over the past 100 years. And forget "elegant density," they say — isolated from existing transit, this project represents the sort of suburban sprawl that promises yet more car-induced gridlock.

The Bay Area's need for housing is urgent. The structural shortage that has worsened for the last several decades didn't die in the downturn — it's just sleeping and will reawaken with the economy. We can't keep squandering chances to address it based solely on the objections that routinely hobble every major Bay Area development proposal.

On the other hand, this project raises questions that demand answers — answers that have yet to be forthcoming. Should a massive project like this be built away from established transportation — or built at sea level, when the Bay's waters are forecast to rise as a result of climate change? And the environmental sensitivity of the site on the bayfront requires careful, genuine scrutiny.

This is a debate worth having — but only when a lot more facts are in. Reflexively supporting or opposing it in the meantime is little more than background noise. ■