

Environmental review starts on \$3.8B Seaport San Diego project proposing to redo 102 acres of land and water area



Seaport San Diego, from developer 1HWY1, is a \$3.8 billion plan to remake 102 acres of land and water area on San Diego Bay with 2.7 million square feet of mixed-use development, including a 500-foot observation tower. The rendering looks north from a reimagined experience, including an urban beach, on the peninsula where Embarcadero Marina Park North is today. The observation tower and other hotels contemplated in the project can be seen in the background. (Courtesy, Seaport San Diego. Master Architect: CallisonRTKL Inc.; Iconic Tower: BIG; Landscape: OJB.)

By Jennifer Van Grove

The Port of San Diego has initiated a state-mandated environmental review of developer 1HWY1's Seaport San Diego project, which proposes to demolish Seaport Village and redo surrounding areas with thousands of hotel rooms, ocean-research facilities, public attractions, and new marinas and piers.

The agency's environmental work, a requirement of the California Environmental Quality Act, officially got under way Thursday with the publication of what's known as a notice of preparation. The 163-page document includes a preliminary evaluation of anticipated impacts to the environment, which are expected to be substantial across categories such as air quality, water quality and transportation.

The notice of preparation alerts the public and other agencies to the ongoing review and solicits input on the areas the port should consider as it works to prepare a draft environmental impact report.

The document's publication comes more than 10 months after Port of San Diego commissioners agreed to launch the environmental review, and speaks to the breadth of analysis needed to understand the implications of a project proposing to redevelop 102 acres of land and water area on San Diego Bay.

"The notice of preparation is a huge milestone from a processing standpoint," said Joseph Smith, whose firm California Coastal Works is the port's contracted project manager for the environmental review. "What we're communicating to the public is essentially a preliminary judgment call. We're saying that there's a lot to this project. There are a lot of issues to be explored."

Backed in part by San Diego's prominent Jacobs family, Seaport San Diego is a total reimagining of downtown's Central Embarcadero, which includes Seaport Village and follows the waterfront from Embarcadero Marina Park North to the G Street Mole, just south of the USS Midway Museum. The port selected 1HWY1 — an entity headed by Yehudi "Gaf" Gaffen, Jeff "JJ" Jacobs (son of Irwin Jacobs) and Jeff Essakow — to redevelop the expansive area in November 2016 following a competitive bidding process.

The project, now estimated to cost \$3.8 billion, proposes 2.7 million square feet of mixed-use development, including 2,050 hotel rooms spread across seven properties, 215,000 square feet of retail and restaurant space, 220,067 square feet of office space for ocean research, 159 boat slips, 16 acres of parks and open space, and 2,250 parking spaces.

The project also features a school, a commercial fishing facility, an urban beach, a large event center, an aquarium, a butterfly pavilion, a yacht club and an elevated walkway — or Green Strand — that travels the length of the site. Its centerpiece is a 500-foot observation tower and hotel located at the start of Pacific Highway.

"Our team is brimming with energy and momentum as we enter the next milestone in this process, the official start of the environmental review process for Seaport San Diego. We understand the port's process will be thorough and will include ample opportunities for public review and feedback," said Gaffen, who runs 1HWY1. "While the release by the port of the notice of preparation is one step in a technical process, it represents significant progress and demonstrates the substantial amount of resources being invested in our proposed project."

Seaport San Diego is divided into 12 subareas — seven land blocks and five water zones — that will be analyzed in the draft environmental impact report. The report will also study three optional project additions, including a water cut feature between land blocks A and B, and an extended pier in the project's Midway Cove Marina allowing for additional boat slips.

As it stands, the project is anticipated to have a significant impact across 17 different

environmental topics identified by state law, according to an initial study of impacts that will need to be analyzed in greater detail.

The project is expected to be built in phases over a seven- to nine-year period. It has the potential, both during and after construction, to negatively affect scenic vistas, increase pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, disturb the bay floor and lower water oxygen levels, create more traffic congestion, increase bird strikes and cause the release of hazardous materials, among other things.

In addition, the project straddles an earthquake fault and falls within a 100-year flood hazard area and tsunami hazard area. The project site is located in an area that has a high potential for liquefaction, meaning loose sand could be saturated with water and behave like liquid during an earthquake, according to the initial study.

The developer is also proposing to raise the elevation of the project site by up to 3 feet in some areas with engineered fill. The strategy is meant to address anticipated sea level rise, but the elevation change could result in other environmental impacts that also need to be studied.

The Port of San Diego has hired California Coastal Works and HDR Engineering to oversee the environmental review process and perform the bulk of the analysis, which includes an estimated 18 different studies and technical reports, Smith, the project manager, said. The firms are budgeted for work that could cost as much as \$2.9 million, when including potential contingency costs and other factors. The developer is responsible for footing the bill.

"It's not a check-the-box exercise. ... We're trying to be thorough and disclose as much as we possibly can," said Shaun Sumner, who is the port's vice president of business operations. " (The environmental impact report) discloses (impacts) to the public, and provides a mitigation, monitoring and reporting program that will allow us to implement measures that ultimately will help benefit the public."

The port expects to release a draft environmental impact report next fall and return to the board with a final document in the summer of 2025, although the timeline is tentative. Port staff will work in parallel to negotiate a lease and other business agreements with 1HWY1, Sumner said.

"The board can't make a decision on a business deal until (the environmental impact review) is complete," Sumner said.

While the port is the primary permitting agency, and thus responsible for the environmental review, the mega development may also require approval or permits from a long list of local, state and federal agencies, including the city of San Diego, California Coastal Commission, San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, according to the notice of preparation.

The port is hosting two public meetings to collect comments on the notice of preparation. The first

will be held at 5 p.m. on Sept. 27 in the training room at the Port Administration Building at 3165 Pacific Highway. A second, virtual-only meeting will take place via Zoom on Sept. 28 at 5:30 p.m. Written comments in response to the notice of preparation are due by Oct. 16.

Additional information about the project, environmental review and public meetings is available at portofsandiego.org/projects/central-embarcadero.

Seaport San Diego project

The Port of San Diego will study the environmental impacts associated with the proposed \$3.8 billion Seaport San Diego project. The project, from developer IHWYL, proposes to remake 102 acres of land and water area on San Diego Bay with 2.7 million square feet of mixed-use development. The project is spread across seven land blocks and five water zones.



Land blocks

- A:** Pacific Highway block, 500-foot observation tower and hotel replacing portions of Seaport Village
- B:** Kettner West block, four hotels of varying price point and event center replacing portions of Seaport Village
- C:** Kettner East block, 14-story hotel
- D:** Ruocco Park block, playground, seating and lawn
- E:** Marina Park block, relocated Looff Carousel, park space and urban beach
- F:** Harbor Drive block, 30-story hotel and convention center, "blue-tech" campus with office space, school and aquarium
- G:** G Street block, Tuna Harbor Park, fish-processing facility and fish market

Water zones

- 1:** Midway Cove Marina, new floating docks, eight slips, accommodates recreational boating and water taxis
- 2:** G Street Mole Marina, new pier, eight slips dedicated to commercial fishing
- 3:** Tuna Harbor, new and replacement floating docks in existing commercial fishing marina, expanded pier, 96 slips
- 4:** Corner Marina, new floating docks, new and expanded piers, replacement overwater restaurant, harbormaster facility, 35 slips for yachts and transient boats
- 5:** Kettner Mole, new floating docks, 12 slips for canoes and jet skis, living shoreline

Sources: Port of San Diego; Nextzen; OpenStreetMap

MICHELLE GILCHRIST U.T.