

Mission Bay's future takes shape: City unveils four proposals to transform bay's northeast corner

Each proposal features climate-friendly marshland, camping areas, recreation, swimming beaches

By David Garrick

SAN DIEGO — San Diego's plan to transform the northeast corner of Mission Bay into a combination of marshland, campsites and recreation areas continued to take shape Wednesday when city officials revealed four separate proposals they will comprehensively analyze this fall.

The first proposal, called De Anza Natural, is a revised version of a proposal Mayor Todd Gloria unveiled in January as his preferred plan for the area, which became available for redevelopment seven years ago when a mobile home park closed.

Gloria's revised plan includes 219 acres of marshland, 60 acres of recreation areas, 49 acres of low-cost camping, 26 acres of open parkland, 6 acres of swimming beaches and 38 acres of upland dunes.

The mayor is prioritizing marshland because it will help the city fight sea-level rise by taking carbon out of the air and by acting as a coastal sponge during rainstorms. Gloria's revised climate action plan commits San Diego to adding 700 total acres of marshland by 2035.

City officials say upland dunes are also important to fighting climate change and sea-level rise, because those uplands will slowly turn into marshland as sea levels rise and put existing marshes under water.

The revisions unveiled Wednesday devote more acres to recreation — 60 versus 45 — than the mayor proposed in January. To make that feasible, the mayor shrank the amount of open parkland in his proposal from 47 acres to 26 acres.

City officials say those changes were made in response to feedback from the public after Gloria's plan was revealed in January. More minor changes include slightly more space for beach swimming and slightly less for camping and dunes.

The three alternative plans that were also unveiled Wednesday all feature more marshland than Gloria's proposal and less space for recreation, camping and swimming beaches.

Those alternatives and Gloria's revised proposal for the 400-acre area will each be comprehensively analyzed as part of an environmental impact report.

City officials said Wednesday they expect to complete that report by early next year and let the City Council choose one of the four options — or some combination of elements of each of them — by the end of 2023.

Supporters of recreational vehicle camping criticized the alternative proposals Wednesday for shrinking the number of acres for camping. One proposal would shrink camping space from the 50 acres available now to 45 acres, while another envisions 40 acres and another only 27 acres.

"A reduction to what is there today would be a hard pill to swallow," said Jacob Gelfand, whose family owns Campland on the Bay RV Park.

The proposal that shrinks camping space to 27 acres would also provide no camping space directly on Mission Bay, limiting camping areas to land just east of Mission Bay Golf Course.

Gelfand said city officials should keep in mind that several community surveys have shown that camping matters more to local residents than the other proposed uses.

"It's abundantly clear the community's No. 1 priority in all of this is the preservation of the incredible, unique and treasured experience of waterfront camping," he said.

Local environmentalists also criticized the city Wednesday. They said the city should study, as one of the alternatives, a bold plan called "the wildest" that calls for 315 total acres of marshland and upland dunes in the northeast corner of Mission Bay.

Gloria's plan calls for 256 total acres of marshland and upland dunes, while the alternative plans the city will analyze call for 264, 267 and 289 total acres of marshland and dunes.

"None of the plans are at the number of acres in 'the wildest' plan and that's the gold standard," said Andrew Meyer, conservation director of the local chapter of the Audubon Society.

Meyer said city officials should at least study that alternative, even if some critics call it extreme, so they know how much it could impact climate change, sea-level rise and other environmental concerns.

"This is an opportunity for the city to be a global leader," Meyer said. "This is the best place and the only place where we can do wetlands restoration because it's on the coast."

Meyer said the city's proposals also don't envision areas where marshland could be combined with recreation, such as marshland where people could kayak or paddleboard.

To see the proposals, go to sandiego.gov/planning/work/park-planning/de-anza.