Dramatic Brown Field overhaul, decades in the making, gets a shakeup and a longer timeline

City officials hope the airport redevelopment — which hit a snag amid junkyard evictions — will bolster already growing Otay Mesa.

By David Garrick

San Diego is trying to keep a dramatic upgrade of Otay Mesa's Brown Field on track by allowing the developer to shuffle which projects will be built first and by extending some development deadlines.

City officials said the developer deserves the concessions partly because it took the city more than two years to evict dozens of vehicle-dismantling businesses occupying land that's key to the developer's plans.

"The hope and expectation is that the project is going to go faster," said Jorge Rubio, the city's chief of airports. "We're hoping that this project is really going to take off."

The upgrade calls for 331 acres of development that will include a modern terminal, a new customs inspection facility, dozens of commercial hangars and more than a million square feet of retail space.

City officials have called the project a game-changer that will transform the underused airport, which many call an eyesore, into a thriving economic catalyst.

"This project will redefine the future of our region and truly unlock the potential of Otay Mesa," said Councilmember Vivian Moreno when the City Council approved the concessions in late October.

City officials said the upgrade, once it's complete in about 20 years, is expected to create about 2,500 new airport jobs and have a $1.5 billion economic impact on the region.

The developer, Industrial Realty Group, broke ground on the 20-year project last summer, then almost immediately asked for the concessions.

One key change the city made was to waive a previous requirement that all new hangars and terminals must be completed before the developer can start building revenue-generating industrial buildings.

The developer will now be allowed to begin constructing the industrial buildings when it has completed roughly half of the aviation projects — a 14,500-square-foot structure for jets, a 37,500 square foot hangar for large aircraft and a 1,000 square-foot customs inspection facility.

The second half of the aviation projects will come later. Those will include another

37,500-square-foot hangar and 28 small aircraft T-hangars of at least 1,200 square feet each.

The city has also agreed to extend the completion deadline for the entire 331-acre project from 2033 to 2044 by changing the start date for a 20-year phasing process from 2013 to last fall.

The city had been using 2013 as the start of the 20-year clock because that's when the project was initially approved, but officials said it makes sense to switch to 2024 because that's when all needed land became available.

"It's a partnership, so we are giving them additional time," Rubio said this week.

City officials say it was early 2022 when they terminated the lease of the tenant that occupied most of the land where industrial projects are planned, but it took until last August to get the tenant out.

Part of the problem was that the tenant had 142 subtenants — most of them involved in auto wrecking and dismantling — that kept operating even though the lease had been terminated.

City officials eventually went to court, were awarded a writ of possession in March and then worked with the sheriff to evict the uncooperative former tenant and the subtenants, a city staff report says.

Rubio said the land is key because the developer needs revenue from the industrial buildings, which is know as Phase Two of the overall project, to help pay for the aviation projects.

"They need to generate revenue in some of those non-aeronautical use areas," he said.

Other concessions from the city include agreeing to allow the third phase of the project, which had previously been limited to commercial development, to include light industrial buildings as well.

In addition, the city and the developer will ask the Federal Aviation Administration to let the developer reduce the acreage on the site devoted to environmental mitigation.

The developer has already agreed to preserve or restore dozens of acres to help threatened species such as the burrowing owl and ferry shrimp.

The project received both state environmental approval under the California Environmental Quality Act and federal environmental approval under the National Environmental Policy Act.

The upgrades and the new customs inspection facility, which will make arrivals more efficient, are expected to make Brown Field more appealing as a reliever airport to congested San Diego International Airport.

The project is also the latest boost for Otay Mesa, which has more acres of undeveloped industrial land than anywhere else in the city of San Diego.

Sandwiched between Chula Vista and the U.S.-Mexico border, the community has experienced significant growth in recent years that includes new housing developments and many commercial projects.

Moreno said the new Brown Field will benefit Otay Mesa and the entire city.

“By attracting international trade and fostering local business growth, we are paving the way for a more prosperous future for all San Diegans,” she said.

Roughly 80,000 flights come in and out of Brown Field annually, including private, corporate, charter, air ambulance, law enforcement, firefighting, flight training and cargo flights.

The upgrades are expected to significantly boost those numbers.

Brown Field opened in 1918 when the Army established an aerial gunnery school there to relieve congestion on Coronado’s North Island. It went through a variety of aviation and non-aviation uses after that.

In 1962, the Navy transferred ownership of Brown Field to the city, on the condition that it remain a public airport.