

A decade in the making, 30-year plan for San Diego's bayfront nears finish line

By Jennifer Van Grove

More than a decade in the making and long past due, the Port of San Diego's future-looking blueprint — a roadmap that spells out what can and cannot be built on some of the region's most prized real estate — is on the cusp of completion.

On Wednesday, the seven appointed commissioners who oversee the San Diego Unified Port District will convene for a special meeting to vote on whether to approve the master plan, or what's known as the Port Master Plan Update. They will also vote on whether to certify the plan's associated environmental impact report.

If commissioners bless the master planning document, their action will tee up consideration by the California Coastal Commission, which has the final say on whether the plan will become the new law of the bayfront land.

"This has been a 10-year labor of love," said Lesley Nishihira, who is assistant vice president of the port's planning and environment division. "Board approval of the (Port Master Plan Update) would mean we could move into the final phase of this comprehensive process. Staff is grateful to everyone who has provided input, asked important and thoughtful questions, and advocated for the needs of their communities and organizations."

Formed by the state Legislature in 1962, the San Diego Unified Port District includes 34 miles of tidelands that traverse San Diego Bay from Shelter Island to Coronado.

The special district is composed of 2,400 acres of land and 3,500 acres of water in total. The document's planning area covers a limited portion of the district — or 1,009 land acres and 1,454 water acres — spread across 10 planning districts.

Port planners opted to exclude the National City and Chula Vista planning districts from the document, as the former tidelands territory is in the last leg of a separate planning process and the latter region is governed by the Chula Vista Bayfront Master Plan.

The master plan is the product of a planning effort that was initiated in 2013 and spawned four different iterations: the discussion draft published in April 2019, the revised draft published in October 2020, the draft Port Master Plan Update published alongside a draft environmental impact report in November 2021, and the final draft Port Master Plan Update and final program environmental impact report published in December.

The Port Master Plan Update represents a marked philosophical shift from the original bayfront blueprint, first adopted in 1964, and includes policies that seek to right the perceived environmental wrongs of decades past. New, bay-wide policies are also meant to further promote public access to the coast and ensure the protection of natural resources.

All told the forward-looking document creates space for 3,910 additional hotel rooms, 340,000 square feet of new retail shops and restaurants, and 20.6 more acres of parks, plazas and open space at buildout in 2050. The increased density extends into the water with space for 75 new anchorages, 485 additional recreational boat slips and 65 more slips for commercial vessels.



Future of the San Diego Unified Port District (Michelle Guerrero / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

New coastal landmarks

The proposed parameters have on-the-ground implications for many familiar destinations, including the highly trafficked street that welcomes locals and visitors to the downtown waterfront.

The plan calls for North Harbor Drive to morph into a coastal landmark where the public realm is enhanced and expanded at the expense of car travel.

Specifically, the waterside portion of Harbor Drive between Grape Street and Seaport Village will feature expansive park spaces sandwiched between a widened promenade and a multi-use path. The coastal stretch, as envisioned, will lead people to new, over-the-water experiences, including a 30,000-square-foot pier south of Grape Street and north of Ash Street, referred to as the "Window to the Bay" pier.

To achieve the iconic waterfront street vision, parking spaces along North Harbor Drive will be eliminated with cars relegated to a garage on a lot just north of the County Administration Center. And car traffic will be pushed east to a narrowed, two-lane portion of the road. The plan also introduces the concept of a dedicated transit right-of-way on the western portion of the street, which would allow for a bayfront circulator to go up and down the Embarcadero.

The vision reflects new mobility policies meant to change behavior, as evidenced in part by the port's response to a comment letter on the draft plan submitted.

The city of San Diego's planning department stressed in its comment letter the significance of adding policies that will further reduce single occupancy vehicle usage. The port noted in its response, published in the final version of the environmental impact report, that the elimination of lanes on Harbor Drive will result in congestion and thus encourage carpooling or public transit usage.

"The (Port Master Plan Update) fulfills the goal to reduce automobile circulation in the North Embarcadero resulting in a decrease of (greenhouse gas) emissions," the port wrote.

Across the Embarcadero planning district, the port is modeling 2 percent growth in total vehicle miles traveled per day associated with increased retail and recreational uses — or 10,643 more miles per day — at buildout. The increase is considered a significant impact.

Under the proposed plan, Harbor Island is intended to absorb the bulk of future hotel rooms — or 3,560 total new rooms spread across West and East Harbor Island when including 500 rooms already approved in the current plan. By contrast, the master plan spells out that the port is not planning to add hotel rooms to the Shelter Island, Coronado or Silver Strand planning districts.

The Harbor Island hotels will be complemented by more shops and restaurants, with expanded commercial activities expected to increase vehicle miles traveled in the planning district by 6 percent — or 25,497 more miles per day — at buildout.

Increased development intensity across the bay is meant to be offset by expanded waterside amenities, including more park space and wider promenades across tidelands.

A concept originally known as the "Green Necklace" proposed to create a public greenway surrounding the bay. The concept has been pared back in recent years because a continuous waterside greenway was deemed impossible in some areas, including around yacht clubs. Instead, the port has baked in policy language designed to create public access paths around most of the bay.

The policy, as currently written, may not satisfy the Coastal Commission, which seeks to maximize public access to the coast.

"The (Port Master Plan Update) includes planning language that exempts all coastal dependent uses from providing public access to the shoreline without meeting the public safety standard, reducing shoreline access throughout the bay," Kanani Leslie, a San Diego-based coastal program manager with the agency, wrote in a comment letter on the draft environmental impact report.

Silence on the Seaport

The master plan has received the loudest criticism for its silence on the future of the Central Embarcadero subdistrict, which includes Seaport Village and Embarcadero Marina Park North. Here developer 1HWY1 is moving forward with its Seaport San Diego project, which would raze Seaport Village and redo surrounding areas with thousands of hotel rooms, ocean-research facilities, public attractions, and new marinas and piers.

Instead of incorporating the mega project into the master plan, the document states that the Central Embarcadero will remain in its current condition.

Adding the anticipated land-use changes would delay the planning document's completion, the agency has said. Port planners also maintain that the decision does not violate the California Environmental Quality Act, or CEQA, which governs environmental reviews. The law forbids "piecemealing," or dividing a project into small pieces to muddy total impacts.

The agency believes it is not required to incorporate Seaport San Diego into the bay-wide planning document because the project is not a foreseeable consequence of the plan.

The Coastal Commission, however, has repeatedly flagged the omission as problematic.

"The project is of interest to the public and commission staff, and would have significant impacts to the adjacent Embarcadero and downtown areas," Leslie, the agency's coastal program manager, said in the comment letter. "As such, it is unclear how the proposed (Port Master Plan Update) is able to comprehensively address planning in this area without the inclusion of policies that address this forthcoming project."

Some members of the public are outraged by the exclusion.

"The Seaport project is enormous and the port is abrogating its responsibility to provide the development standards for the Central Embarcadero but, instead, is letting the developer set his own standards," Janet Rogers, who is with the Embarcadero Coalition, wrote in a January email to the agency. "The port has the responsibility to set these standards."

A separate email to coalition members, who are downtown residents, raised the possibility of taking legal action against the port should the board vote to adopt the plan.

Another group, Save Our Access, a nonprofit that has sued other local government entities for perceived environmental review failures, has similar concerns and appears to be laying the groundwork for litigation.

"The (Port Master Plan Update's) lopsided focus on hotels, commercial space and restaurants in comparison to a minimal increase in public park acreage fails to align with the port's own stated policies and violates the port's fiduciary duties under the Public Trust Doctrine and its legal responsibilities under the California Coastal Act," attorneys for the nonprofit wrote in a lengthy comment letter.

The port has been decidedly unwilling to bend to the Seaport criticism, even while acquiescing to public outcry on other controversial topics over the yearslong planning process.

By contrast, in 2019, port commissioners directed agency planners to protect, with amended policy language, four piers with private docks that extend into the Shelter Island Yacht Basin. The La Playa Piers, as they're known, predate the port's existence and received an outpouring of public support when residents learned that previous language would have seen the piers demolished if they were not fully open to the public.

The fate of the piers may not yet be decided. The Public Trust Doctrine and the San Diego Port Act prohibit residential uses on state tidelands. The Coastal Commission has said repeatedly that the piers need to be fully accessible to the public or they must be removed.

The issue and others like it, including the port's decision to let developers pay a fee instead of building lower-cost hotel rooms within their projects, could prove sticking points should the Port Master Plan Update land on the Coastal Commission's desk later this year.

"I'm confident we can work through it all," Nishihira, the port's planning executive, said. "It just may take some time."