

Coastal Commission approves long-awaited Barrio Logan growth plan — with caveats. Will the city OK its changes?

By Emily Alvarenga

The long-awaited community growth blueprint for Barrio Logan is one step closer to being implemented after it was unanimously approved by the Coastal Commission this week — but there are some key changes the city must agree to first.

The plan update aims to improve public health in Barrio Logan — situated just south of downtown on the San Diego Bay — by separating residents from the neighboring shipping industry, while ensuring no new industrial facilities are permitted in the pollution-weary neighborhood.

It was given the green light by the City Council in December 2021 but has been awaiting final approval from the California Coastal Commission, which must weigh in on any planning policies and development that affects the state's coastlines.

On Thursday, the commission voted unanimously to approve an amended version of the plan. Now, the ball is back in the city's court to approve the commission's suggested modifications.

"Barrio Logan has been historically a marginalized community ... that's been at the tail end of years and years of pollution, so it's really great to see that we've come this far," said commissioner and Imperial Beach Mayor Paloma Aguirre. "It's a resilient community that's up-and-coming."

Heidi Vonblum, the city's planning director, says her department will bring the Barrio Logan plan as amended before the council for its consideration as soon as possible.

The final hurdle

City planners have been working with the commission to address proposed modifications over the past year, such as improving access to the bayfront through bilingual wayfinding signage and restoring the Chollas Creek, a watershed that drains into the San Diego Bay.

Coastal Program Manager Kanani Leslie says the city is in agreement with all modifications — except two policies regarding affordable hotel accommodations, which have been a point of contention in past community plan discussions.

The city has pushed back on the commission's proposed modifications, which would change policy language from suggesting low-cost units to requiring them, arguing that it is not appropriate to require on an individual community basis.

The commission's modifications would add language to require a one-to-one replacement of

low-cost hotel or motel facilities and would require more expensive hotels to make a quarter of their rooms lower-cost, or else pay a fee to help fund future development of cheaper accommodations.

Marlon Pangilinan, a program coordinator in the city's Planning Department, said these policies could have unintended consequences, potentially discouraging developers from building in Barrio Logan.

The city would prefer to implement these policies across all 12 coastal neighborhoods. "We must consider consistency in our policy decisions to ensure fairness and equal treatment," Pangilinan added.

The one-to-one replacement policy was of utmost concern to both of the residents who spoke during public comment, including Julie Corrales, who described problems at the neighborhood's only current low-cost motel. "It's been horrendous to live next to," she said, explaining that her children have woken up in the night to police raids and seen dead bodies on its balconies.

City officials have called the Main Street Motel in Barrio Logan a magnet for crime, declaring it a public nuisance. In four years, police have gotten 229 calls for service there, the City Attorney's Office said, including calls about prostitution, loitering, fights and drug overdoses.

"This is the kind of activity that we see, unfortunately, in this community when there's low-cost accommodations," said Corrales, who is chair of the Barrio Logan Community Planning Group and a policy advocate with the Environmental Health Coalition. "The Barrio is not a place for tourists to come spend time in the coastal area. ... Right now, replacing these units is not beneficial to anyone in the community."

Just last month, the motel agreed to adopt dozens of new business practices aimed at putting an end to the illegal activity.

In response to these concerns, the commission agreed to exclude the Main Street establishment from the changes they have proposed, meaning the one-to-one policy would not apply. But commissioners decided to retain the policy for future development.

"We're hoping that if it's not a good place to bring visitors now, we certainly hope that at some point in the future that's changed," said Karl Schwing, the commission's district director.

City staff raised similar concerns with affordable hotel policies in 2015 when the Ocean Beach growth blueprint was being considered. At that time, then-commissioners agreed to remove those policies — but current commissioners say that eight years later, the city still has yet to come forward with a comprehensive, citywide ordinance.

Commission staff said these suggested policies are also consistent with its statewide practices and similar to other recent amendments made in Long Beach and Half Moon Bay.

A long time coming

Barrio Logan is one of San Diego's most culturally diverse neighborhoods — as well as one of the most polluted. It ranks in the 90th percentile of the most pollution-burdened communities in California, according to the state Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment's CalEnviroScreen.

The community was primarily residential until World War II shipyards expanded and heavy industry took over the waterfront. Pollution in the neighborhood worsened in the late 1960s, when construction of the San Diego-Coronado Bridge tore it in half.

Since then, the primarily Latino community has uneasily coexisted with industrial uses they say have polluted the air and posed health risks.

The new proposed community plan update — which guides development in the 1,000-acre planning area over the next 20 to 30 years — creates a 65-acre buffer zone between housing areas and the nearby shipping industry where any new or expanded industrial uses are prohibited.

It also calls for tripling the number of homes and for building eight new parks and more neighborhood-friendly projects.

If approved, it will be the first update to the community's growth plan since 1978.

In 2014, local business groups overturned a similar effort with the successful citywide referendum.

The city has six months to approve the amended plan and report back to the commission. That time period can be extended if needed, Leslie said.

Corrales told the San Diego Union-Tribune on Friday that she's disappointed in the long wait. The planning group she chairs had just recently decided not to push for adjustments to the new plan's affordable housing requirement, because it would have delayed things even further, allowing industrial businesses to keep growing their foothold in the meantime.

"We felt that it would be more detrimental to wait, as businesses are pulling permits now to expand in areas being changed from industrial to neighborhood," she said. "Well, ironically, it has to go back to the council and Coastal (Commission) anyway, without any of the changes that really matter to us — and we have to wait longer for environmental justice."

After the council makes its decision, the Planning Department will have to submit the Barrio Logan community plan back to the commission for final certification, Vonblum said.

If the city chooses not to approve the suggested modifications, they could suggest different amendments and start the approval process over, Leslie added.