

Revision to Saltworks plan renews traffic concerns

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When a developer applied in May 2009 to build a mini-city on 1,400 acres of Cargill salt flats in Redwood City, one of the first things city officials did was check whether the project would create a traffic nightmare.

In January 2010, they released a report that concluded DMB Associates' proposed Redwood City Saltworks plan should be processed because on first brush it appeared to adequately address traffic and other environmental issues.

That assessment was based in part on the company's transportation plan, which envisioned traffic flowing in and out of the development on three roads that would connect to Bayfront Expressway/Marsh Road, Blomquist Street/Seaport Boulevard and a new Highway 101 bridge to Broadway in the Midpoint Technology Park area.

But eight months later, Arizona-based DMB Associates modified its application to remove the word "vehicle" from the description of the new Highway 101 bridge.

As a result, the bridge would only carry pedestrians, bicycle traffic and a streetcar that shuttles people through the development.

Redwood City Senior Planner Blake Lyon, who is overseeing the Saltworks application process, wouldn't speculate this week whether the revision may turn out to be a project killer, but he confirmed that additional traffic studies will have to be done to determine "what the existing roadways can hold."

The city's January 2010 report allowing the environmental review to proceed sounded

rather conclusive, however.

"If any one of these major connections is found to be infeasible, it is unlikely that the full project could be developed since it would be difficult to provide sufficient roadway capacity in the remaining connections as currently presented," states the report, noting that Saltworks could add up to 7,000 vehicles to city roadways during peak commute times.

David Smith, DMB's senior vice president, dismissed the city's preliminary traffic analysis as merely a "catalyst for discussion on a number of points" and emphasized that the current environmental review of the project would include a "full-level drill down" to determine the real traffic impacts.

Smith also said that DMB spokesman Michael Henderson was "mistaken" when he told The Daily News earlier this month that the 101 overpass was "never envisioned at any time" for cars.

Smith said DMB decided to exclude cars from the proposed Highway 101 overpassing to encourage people to walk or use bicycles and public transportation. As part of that effort, he added, the company expects to revise its development plan to also reduce the amount of parking available within Saltworks.

"For us, Saltworks is all about getting people out of their cars," Smith said.

If the environmental study shows that more roadway access points are needed in and out of Saltworks,

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DMB would reconsider allowing vehicles on the Highway 101 bridge, Smith said. "We'll absolutely look at everything that the analysis says is appropriate," he added.

"If the developer had indicated two years ago that it wasn't proposing to make that transit connection, the city should have concluded it didn't need to move the project forward and do an environmental impact report," said David Lewis, executive director of Save the Bay, an environmental group that has vigorously opposed the Saltworks development from the start.

"If they don't let cars onto that overpass, or they're proposing not to build one, one of the pillars on which the development is premised is gone," Lewis said.

If eventually approved as proposed, the Saltworks development would have 12,000 houses, along with office buildings, schools, parks and 436 acres of restored natural habitat and wetlands. Its population would be roughly equal to those of San Carlos or Foster City.

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