

Embarcadero plan OK'd by Coastal Commission

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- San Diego Unified Port District

The North Embarcadero Visionary Plan calls for upgrading San Diego's "front porch" at the western waterfront. The port district and city have approved \$29.6 million for the first phase.

North Embarcadero: 14 years in the making

The vision of making San Diego's western waterfront into the city's "front door" dates all the way back to planner John Nolen's 1908 master plan for the city. But the current effort began 14 years ago.

1997: Port Chairman Mike McDade proposes a revitalization of the waterfront by the city, county, port, CCDC and Navy, which form the North Embarcadero Alliance.

1998: North Embarcadero Visionary Plan adopted with a cost estimate of \$54 million. Voters approve East Village site of Petco Park, following Padres decision not to build on western waterfront.

2001: California Coastal Commission approves a port master plan amendment incorporating the visionary plan.

2003: The city, its redevelopment agency acting through the Centre City Development Corp. and port sign a joint-powers agreement to implement the plan, but the county and Navy choose not to join. Navy approves Midway aircraft carrier museum for waterfront.

2005: Eckstut & Kuhn Architects prepare schematic plan for the one-mile stretch of between Laurel and Market streets, which eliminated the oval park at foot of Broadway envisioned in the visionary plan, projected to cost \$228 million. Developer Douglas F. Manchester wins long-term lease from the Navy for “Pacific Gateway” hotel-office complex on south side of Broadway at Harbor Drive.

2006: Port selects consortium of developers to build 800-room, \$470 million complex at Lane Field, north of Broadway at Harbor Drive.

2007-9: Final design by Project Design Consultants and Civitas focuses on first phase, now estimated a \$29.6 million. Port approves Broadway Pavilion cruise ship terminal.

2010: Coastal Commission 4-4 tie vote rejects first phase and port holds workshops as it makes revisions.

2011: Coastal Commission approves revised first phase.

The initial phase of a plan conceived 14 years ago to beautify San Diego’s downtown waterfront received the blessing today of the California Coastal Commission, paving the way for the start of construction by year’s end.

The \$29.6 million project, part of the larger North Embarcadero Visionary Plan, calls for a dramatic transformation of the bayfront west of Pacific Highway and between the B Street and Navy Piers along Harbor Drive.

A 105-foot-wide esplanade along a realigned Harbor Drive -- three times its current size -- is planned, along with groves of jacarandas, ticketing and food pavilions, a public restroom, and plenty of space for casual eating and people-watching.

Also called for is a new two-acre public park or plaza within the Lane Field hotel development site at the northeast corner of Harbor Drive and Broadway.

The commission, which had turned down a similar plan on a tie vote last April, approved the project on an 8-1 vote, but imposed several conditions.

Among them are implementation of a shuttle system along Harbor Drive and replacement parking spaces to compensate for the removal of 146 waterside spaces. The commission also is requiring the Port of San Diego to add an additional 1.25 acres of parkland, mostly along the water's edge, to make up for the elimination of the once-proposed 2.5-acre oval park at the foot of Broadway.

San Diego City Council President Pro Tem Kevin Faulconer, who chairs the North Embarcadero Visionary Plan Joint Powers Authority, called the commission action historic.

"This world-class project opens up the City's waterfront and creates a new front porch. Park space, walkways and trees will replace concrete and asphalt. These plans have been on the drawing board for more than a decade, so I am extremely proud that this shovel-ready project has finally become a reality."

Some of the project supporters, who just a year ago had been vocal opponents, praised the port for its public outreach and willingness to address their concerns. They were part of a coalition of local activists, labor leaders and environmentalists who worked with the port over the last year in crafting a revised plan that they and the Coastal Commission could support.

"This project could not have been successful today without support from many different factions, including a dedicated port staff, the Navy Broadway Complex Coalition, Unite Here (hotel workers), which had reservations in the past, and the Lane Field developer, who was willing to give up a large part of their development parcel to preserve open space for public access," said Port Commissioner Lee Burdick.

Ian Trowbridge, co-chairman of the Navy Broadway Complex Coalition and at one time one of the port's harshest critics, said he is pleased the Coastal Commission saw fit to move the project forward.

"We believe the port has changed its philosophy and we can assume the statements they make about the future are going to be honored and not just forgotten as in the past," said Trowbridge.

Coastal Commission co-chair Esther Sanchez, who a year ago had expressed reservations about the waterfront makeover because of the reduced size of a planned park, said she was now satisfied with the changes made by the port.

"There's no question this project will phenomenally increase public access to a wonderful resource," said Sanchez, an Oceanside city councilwoman.

In approving the project, the commission rejected the appeal of a small group of opponents, who argued that the proposed improvements are inconsistent with the San Diego Unified Port District's master plan and that analysis is needed of seismic risks should an earthquake occur.

"With the approval of this, city and port officials plan to eliminate the major port master plan park at Broadway and Harbor and block the view of San Diego Bay from Broadway," said Scott Andrews, one of the key opponents.

Some coastal Commissioners, as well, expressed concerns about inconsistencies with the port's master plan but were largely reassured by port officials and commission staff who said the special conditions being imposed would remedy that.

Commissioner Meg Caldwell, who was the lone no vote, felt that the port needed to amend its master plan before moving ahead with the revised North Embarcadero plan. The port has begun work on amending the plan to guide the second phase of the plan, projected to be completed over the next 10 years and result in a mile-long stretch of the western waterfront significantly more attractive than today.

While the vision for a transformed, pedestrian-friendly North Embarcadero first took shape in 1998, its execution was long bedeviled by economic downturns, litigation, financing hurdles and opposition from environmentalists.

More recently, many of those critics, who were troubled by the addition of a new cruise ship terminal on Broadway Pier and the shrinking of an oval park there to a small paved space, came back on board after compromises were worked out in the last year.

With funding from downtown redevelopment property taxes, the San Diego Unified Port District has been overseeing the approval process, aided by the city and the Centre City Development Corp., the city's downtown redevelopment arm. The money had been jeopardized by Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal to end redevelopment efforts as a way to close the state's budget deficit, but the city and port already have acted to secure the money just in case.

The effort is just a fraction of the many millions of dollars in private investment that are expected to follow. The first is the planned 800-room complex at Lane Field, a parking lot at Broadway and Harbor Drive where the minor league Padres played from 1936 to 1957.

Jerry Trammer, who represents the developers, worked out a revision that will accommodate a 150-foot-wide setback park or plaza and an agreement with the Unite Here hotel workers union to keep labor peace through a card-check plan. He estimates the hotel complex will cost more than \$225 million.

The Embarcadero effort began 14 years ago, when land-use attorney Mike McDade, newly elected chairman of the port board, proposed in his inaugural address to remake the waterfront with the cooperation of a multiplicity of agencies.

"This place -- our front porch -- is really a dump," he remembers telling a developer friend as they strolled along Harbor Drive. "Why not do something about it?"

Out of that spark of inspiration, McDade met with city, county, redevelopment, port and Navy officials and formed the North Embarcadero Alliance. A grand vision of open vistas, landscaped parks and room for people rather than cars emerged in the North Embarcadero Visionary Plan, adopted in 1998. The Coastal Commission lent its approval in 2000 and detailed planning proceeded.

Environmentalists, however, cooled to the plans once the details were revealed, particularly irked by the addition of a new cruise ship terminal on Broadway Pier. Compromises worked out in the last year brought most of the critics back on board.

The port, responsible for both traditional industrial port activities and tourist-related developments, will oversee the construction phase and handle maintenance of the improvements.

Port Chairman Scott Peters said there were honest differences of opinion in interpreting port plans, but he thinks they amounted to distracting technicalities.

“Today always seems harder than yesterday, but I think there are always challenges,” Peters said.

Once the first phase is completed by mid-2013, he thinks the public will clamor for the rest to be completed. The cost is projected at about \$40 million with private developers covering other costs. It would extend the Harbor Drive improvements north and south and later enhance B, Broadway and Navy piers at additional cost.

“Once we do Phase 1 that itself will help convince people this is a great thing and worthy of their support,” Peters said. “As they say in sports, one day at a time.”

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