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S.F. staying in game to keep 49ers
BUT SITE IN SANTA CLARA REMAINS `PRIMARY FOCUS,' TEAM SAYS

By Mike Swift and Julie Patel
SanJose Mercury News
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In a city where politicians are often as unified as a bag of cats, Aaron Peskin thought just a few months ago that plans to rebuild San Francisco's southeast bayfront around a new 49ers stadium were pretty much dead.

Not anymore.
"It is remarkable," Peskin, president of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, said of the momentum for plans to rebuild Hunters Point and Candlestick Point into the waterfront neighborhood for thousands of homes, several hundred acres of bayfront parkland - and a 49ers stadium. "There's always controversy, but I think the city family is pretty darned much on the same page."

San Francisco's show of unity about bringing the 49ers to Hunters Point comes at a pivotal moment for the team's stadium bid in Santa Clara. The 49ers on Tuesday will show the public the first significant details on how they would finance a $950 million stadium near the Great America theme park, and how much they would ask the city of Santa Clara to contribute.

Courting Santa Clara
Halfway through what is supposed to be a six-month courtship between Santa Clara and the storied NFL franchise, the team says Santa Clara remains the "primary focus." But even as the team last week redoubled its direct appeals to Santa Clarans - distributing a glossy flier that touted the team's civic and economic benefits and inviting residents to upcoming "neighborhood chats" about the stadium - there's no clear indication yet that the 49ers and the city are headed for the altar.

City staff members are wary about a suggestion to tap the Santa Clara electric utility's reserve funds to help finance the stadium. No Santa Clara political leader has emerged as an unequivocal stadium champion. For many residents, information trickling out about the stadium and the city's possible financial role is only raising questions, including why the city should spend money on the stadium instead of other programs and services. Meanwhile, San Francisco is working to keep the 49ers after the team scuttled plans for a stadium at Candlestick Point last fall following a decade of delays.

"Let's be clear, the city of Santa Clara is and remains the 49ers' primary focus," 49ers spokesman Pete Hillan said Friday, but he added that "the 49ers will continue to work with the city of San Francisco as they move forward on plans for the Hunters Point area."

The 49ers refused to discuss the details of Tuesday's presentation, but the team has told Santa Clara leaders that the proposal will include the cost of building and operating the stadium, stadium revenues, information about game-day transportation and a general update on the team's research so far. The team is expected to ask Santa Clara to contribute about $180 million.

The city will have to determine the source of that contribution, team officials say, but the 49ers are expected to offer about 10 possibilities in May.

In recent weeks, Santa Clara stadium opponents have become increasingly vocal. Certain funding scenarios, such as tapping the city's utility reserves, would almost certainly require voter approval, and even if they don't, residents - who have been writing letters to the editor and attending meetings on the issue by the dozens - may start a ballot

initiative. Time is short if the city council wants to place a resolution on the November ballot: the deadline is Aug. 10 to file a question with Santa Clara County.

Vice Mayor Will Kennedy said that in his two years on the council, "this has generated the most opinions one way or the other."

"That leads me to think it may be something that ultimately goes to the voters," he said.

Voters play big role

So public opinion is critical. The 49ers polled Santa Clarans in late March in the wake of City Manager Jennifer Sparacino's memo predicting electricity rate increases of up to 13 percent if the utility reserve was tapped, but the team won't release the results.

During the past few months, the 49ers have reached out to dozens of community leaders and groups to gauge local opinions. The latest flier, distributed to about 85 percent of city households so far, features photos of quarterback Alex Smith and veteran defensive end Bryant Young with his arm around a group of kids, under details of the 49ers' community work and donations by the 49ers Foundation. Residents who call a telephone number on the flier can receive stadium literature in the mail or sign up for Internet chats about the stadium issue.

Meanwhile, on the team's second stadium front, the 49ers have toned down their public rhetoric about the former Hunters Point Naval Shipyard.

Covering the bases

Out are references to radioactive Superfund sites and "political gamesmanship" by San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom. In are salving words about San Francisco's progress at Hunters Point.

Sources close to talks in San Francisco say the team has gone from criticizing Hunters Point to sincerely looking for solutions to its significant problems with pollution and access.

Newsom and Peskin said the city would begin an environmental impact study by June, a state-mandated review that could take as long as two years and would be required in Santa Clara as well. Navy officials say the cleanup can be complete in time to begin stadium construction in 2009, but the contamination remains a source of uncertainty for the 49ers.

For Newsom and Peskin, the beauty of the combined Hunters Point-Candlestick Point effort is that it is foremost a means to transform the city's economically depressed Bayview and Hunters Point neighborhoods, not just a scheme to inflate a rich NFL owner's franchise value by several hundred million dollars.

"We are fulfilling promises made to the community over the past two decades," Newsom said last week. "I don't think anybody in Bayview-Hunters Point thinks that fulfilling the promises that were made a generation ago is moving too quickly."

Some critics point out that the city is also enriching a powerful corporation - Lennar Corp. - by granting sole development rights to Candlestick Point.

One of those, Supervisor Jake McGoldrick, said the plan may be a political ploy by Newsom, an "illusion" to obscure the failure of the city's bid for the 2016 Olympics and the potential loss of the 49ers - especially with the San Francisco mayoral election coming in November.

"They're rushing too much, to cover their political bases," McGoldrick said. "You know, it's an election year. It could lead to bad policy."