Message

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Sent: 9/21/2016 7:55:12 PM
To: Smith, James [James.Smith@nrc.gov]; Chang, Richard [Richard.Chang@nrc.gov]; raymond.powell@nrc.gov
Subject: FYI - SF Magazine article - Faked Soil Samples Throw Hunters Point Shipyard Development into Disarray

http://www.modernluxury.com/san-francisco/story/faked-soil-samples-throw-hunters-point-shipyard-development-disarray

Faked Soil Samples Throw Hunters Point Shipyard Development into Disarray

Chris Roberts | Photo: Todd Lappin/Creative Commons | September 21, 2016

EPA puts the brakes on developer receiving Navy land—which may be more toxic than we know.

New homes under construction at the SF Shipyard in May 2014.

New neighborhoods don't sprout overnight, even in a historic housing crisis. Transforming the former U.S. Navy shipyard at Hunters Point into a hipster-friendly enclave of more than 12,000 homes has already taken decades. And throwing millions of square feet of office space and a park on top of what's still a toxic landfill will require a few additional decades before developer FivePoint is finished.

That's if everything goes as planned. It isn't.

FivePoint, a new entity whose majority shareholder is former shipyard master developer Lennar Urban, only has land to develop if the Navy has clean land to transfer over. And following earlier admissions of faked soil samples by Tetra Tech, the contractor the Navy hired to monitor levels of radionuclides, pesticides, petroleum, and other byproducts of shipbuilding and Cold War nuclear experimentation, that transfer has been curtailed for the near term.

At the shipyard, August 2015.

Photo: Lamar Anderson

Tetra Tech has been testing soil at the shipyard since at least the mid-1990s, according to Navy records. Whistleblowers within the firm first started going public with concerns that the cleanup was a botched sham four years ago—allegations sustained by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which confirmed the company pulled dirt from an area known to be clean and passed it off as emanating from a different area, where housing is slated to be built. In July, the Navy admitted to local environmental nonprofit Greenaction that it has identified 386 "anomalous" soil samples out of the more than 25,000 taken over the past 20 years. There could be more; how widespread the fakery is is still under investigation.

In the meantime, the process of transferring the land from the Navy to FivePoint was placed on hold this month, until "the actual potential public exposure to radioactive material at and near" the shipyard can be "clarified," per a letter sent from the EPA to the Navy on September 13.

For the environmental watchdogs convinced that the Navy—the same Navy that filled an aircraft carrier irradiated during hydrogen bomb tests with barrels of nuclear waste and sank it off the Farallones—is understating the health hazards of living at the shipyard, this is a mark of vindication.

For the city eager to add homes, it's a mark of potential disaster. On Monday, Mayor Ed Lee and Supervisor Malia Cohen sent a formal letter to EPA honchos in Washington, asking for a briefing—"confidential if necessary"—to learn just how long the investigation into Tetra Tech might take, and how much longer this will drag out the already epic shipyard project.

"We absolutely want and expect the Navy to clean up the Shipyard, and expect that this current review will be conducted thoroughly," said Kofi Bonner, the regional president for FivePoint.

And yet, the very definition of the word "clean" is in question here. Hovering over the issue of how thoroughly the cleanup was faked is the Navy's very definition of the word—which, according to academics from UC Santa Cruz's Environmental and Nuclear Policy program who reviewed the project at the behest of Greenaction, is not clean at all. According to UCSC, the Navy is using archaic, Cold War-era standards that allow for almost double the amount of background radiation the EPA currently recommends—25 millirems, about the equivalent of 12 chest x-rays a year for those living on the site—and levels of strontium, cesium, and plutonium up to several hundred times current EPA standards.

All the while, 81 acres of the nearly 500-acre shipyard are already in FivePoint's hands, and construction will continue there in the hopes of building a total of 1,400 homes by 2018. These units are located on parcels of land transferred to the city more than a decade ago. Samples made at the time indicated these sites are safe. But according to a July email from the Navy, Tetra Tech may have done sampling work there, too. FivePoint's Bonner says that the land where the first 88 townhomes sold out in months is assuredly clean. But as for the land just a stone's throw away from those new homes' doorsteps, no one can currently say.

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