

BY LISA OWENS VIANI

Photo by Kathryn Broker-Bulllick



UFOs across Wildcat Marsh: Chevron's propane storage tanks peek through a sea of cordgrass and wild oats.

Conjure City

Richmond Entertains a Vision-a-Week for Its Shoreline

This year's Coastal Cleanup Day is gorgeous, one of those sunny summer-into-fall treats, with clear blue skies and a breeze off the bay hinting at the change in season. Richmond City Councilmember Tom Butt, his wife Shirley, and I are combing for trash along the North Richmond shore, intent on our own mini-cleanup.

As the three of us stop to gaze west, across Wildcat Marsh, I ask Butt why, just when it seemed we had finally understood beyond a doubt that it's best not to fill the bay or trash its wetlands, the city of Richmond wants to plop a deep container port down on top of Wildcat Marsh (and likely other marshes along the North Richmond shoreline as well).

Butt shakes his head. "You're asking the wrong person," he says. "It's insane."

Richmond boasts the longest stretch of shoreline of any East Bay city—32 miles—and an even longer history of citizen environmental activism. The north shoreline is one of the few places around the bay

where you can still see expanses of untrammled salt marsh unframed by housing or industry or watch white-tailed kites conducting aerial maneuvers. You might even catch a glimpse of an endangered California clapper rail lurking in the cordgrass.

Yet city leaders seem determined to ruin this ecological treasure. Citizen activists only recently fought off—with the help of the East Bay Regional Park District—a proposal to build a huge housing complex on Breuner Marsh, one of the bay's most intact marshes and habitat of several endangered species (see *Terrain*, Fall 2005). But the "city of pride and purpose" doesn't give up easily.

On July 25, during a city council meeting, city staff announced its intention to "study"—in partnership with Long Beach port design firm Moffat and Nichol Engineers—building a deep water container port on the north shoreline—despite the fact that Richmond already has a container port on its south shoreline. While the exact configuration of the port was left unspecified, City Manager Bill



Tom Butt

Photo by Kathryn Broker-Bullick



Lindsay suggested that the areas in question are parts of the Chevron refinery (south of Wildcat Marsh) and the West Contra Costa landfill to the north of the marsh. To make use of those sites, the Bay Conservation and Development Commission's Will Travis, who met with Lindsay to discuss the port idea, concluded, "They would have to dredge two ship channels, two turning basins, two berthing areas, and build two connections to the rail and road system." The cost of such an undertaking, says Travis, would be prohibitive.

In an August 28 letter to Lindsay, Travis suggested that the city reexamine its existing port, pointing out that the Richmond Harbor navigation channel is 45 feet deep and "requires considerably less deepening and maintenance dredging than would be required in developing access to a north Richmond port site." Jeff Inglis, a member of the North Richmond Shoreline Open Space Alliance, agrees. "What is the current status of that port, what is its potential, and how much of that potential is being utilized?" he asks. "Rather than putting money into studying developing these protected areas, shouldn't the city be looking what it can do to maximize existing resources?"

Another lifelong Richmond resident worries that the entire shoreline is in jeopardy—and not just from Richmond's current development-idea-of-the-week.

Environmental activist Whitney Dotson says that the port study "will cover everything from Wildcat Marsh all the way to Breuner Marsh. One of my fears is that they're planning to take over the whole shoreline." Dotson adds that on a recent boat tour given to local business councils, Port Director Jim Metzorkis announced that the city hopes to develop the entire shoreline. "They're determined to make some money off of the shoreline one way or another," says Dotson. Neither Lindsay nor Metzorkis returned my calls.

Dotson is conducting his own feasibility study—of turning the shoreline into a state park. Dotson is one of the leaders of the North Richmond Open Space Shoreline Alliance, and he has been in discussion with the California State Parks Foundation. His group recently convened a community meeting, to which it invited regulators, city staff, and anyone interested in discussing the future of the shoreline, and it is coming up with its own vision. It is in large part due to this group keeping an eye on the city and insisting on protecting the shoreline that several prominent environmental organizations weighed in on the proposed port.

One of those, 21-year-old Wildcat-San Pablo Creeks Watershed Council, which has fought for decades to restore and preserve both creeks and the marshes they flow into, points out in a letter to Lindsay that over \$21 million of public money—from the State Lands Commission, the California Department of Water Resources, CALFED, the East Bay Regional Park District, Contra Costa County, the federal government, and the California Coastal Conservancy—has been funneled into an environmentally healthy flood control project for these two creeks, including restoring the marshes and floodplains, making them accessible to the public, and creating regional trails to connect regional parks with the shoreline. In its letter, the council also calls to Lindsay's attention the fact that the original flood control project to dredge a channel through Wildcat Marsh had to be abandoned because of contamination in the marsh. Any current-day dredging would reawaken those long-buried contaminants that have leached or been drained into the marsh from the landfill, the wastewater treatment plant, and numerous nearby industries, such as the Chevron refinery.

In addition to toxics—and the question of where contaminated dredge spoils could be deposited—the Sierra Club, Save the Bay, and the San Francisco Bay Joint Venture, a voluntary coalition of 27 agencies, businesses, and private organizations whose members are working to "protect, restore, increase, and enhance" wetlands and riparian habitats throughout the Bay Area, raise the issue of impacts on endangered species like the California clapper rail, and the salt marsh harvest mouse, as well as on

species of concern such as long-billed curlews and ospreys, which nest and forage in and around Wildcat Marsh and the Richmond shoreline, as well as over 100 other bird species. Dredging would also harm nearby eelgrass beds, some of the most intact and extensive subtidal habitat existing in the bay, these agencies point out.

In its September 6, 2006 letter to the city, the Joint Venture offered to "work with the city of Richmond as we have done with other municipalities to help bring about the economic and recreational benefits of protected and restored natural areas." The Venture's coordinator, Beth Huning, says her organization worked with the city of Petaluma as it debated building a traditional sewage treatment plant that would have harmed nearby marshes. Petaluma instead created a natural treatment marsh that provided additional habitat—and earned the city good public relations. "A whole series of projects has lined up because of that one," says Huning. Huning attended the North Richmond Shoreline Open Space Alliance's meeting and has offered to make a presentation to the city council.

What's with this manic energy to develop the shoreline? "There's this mantra in Richmond that too many people buy into," says Butt. "It's that Richmond needs jobs and the only way to address that is to build more stuff and get more tax dollars—that that will solve all of our problems. But it won't. The Port of Oakland hasn't solved West Oakland's crime problems—and it's bigger than what's being proposed here."

Butt has his own vision for the shoreline. "I think that all undeveloped green space on the north shoreline should be protected. The city could bolster its image and attract visitors that way; we need to get more people to use the Bay Trail. Maybe there would be trail-related businesses, cafes, an environmental ed center. Maybe we could expand the Eastshore State Park—in the end that would have more economic value to Richmond than any type of development."

Councilmember Gayle McLaughlin, who is running for mayor this year, says she also wants to "keep Richmond's shorelines open, accessible, clean, and public," and would like to see restoration efforts using Richmond's youth. "The developers, always anxious for a quick return, push irresponsible plans, and certain city staff act as if they are employed by the developers," she says. "Before we know it, a bad project has been developed, rubber-stamped, and approved by a majority on the council. Not too long ago we had city staff promoting 1,300 housing units on the toxic Zeneca site on the South Richmond shoreline. Thankfully the people of Richmond, from the south to the north shoreline, are standing against irresponsible development."



Photo by Kathryn Brooker-Bullfick

Mayor Irma Anderson and the other councilmembers were asked for their visions for the shoreline but did not respond. Councilmember Jim Rogers seems to be listening to enviros' and citizens' concerns. He tried to pass a resolution that would have convened a "blue-ribbon taskforce" of citizens, businesses, and environmental groups to study the shoreline in lieu of a container port study. In typical Richmond fashion, the resolution failed in a split vote.

Meanwhile, Chevron developed a case of mild schizophrenia. At the July 25 city council meeting, Chevron representative Jim Brumfield waxed eloquent about the container ship plan and lauded city staffers who were pushing the idea. Yet Chevron spokesperson Camille Priselac says Chevron supports the idea of a study but would "prefer that the port not be situated" on its property: "We believe in buffer zones around our property. The city hasn't even talked with us or met with us about this."

What would Chevron's interest be? Some speculate that if a deep ship channel were dredged next to its facility, Chevron could import liquefied natural gas. When I pose this theory to Bruce Beyaert, former manager of environmental planning with Chevron, who has submitted a letter questioning the economic and regulatory hurdles of the proposed port, he confirms that Chevron has major natural gas reserves abroad—in Australia, in particular—and has expressed interest in bringing LNG into the United States. The infrastructure for a container ship port would not be suitable without major modifications, points out Beyaert. Yet, he adds, having a deep ship channel dredged right next to its refinery would overcome a major hurdle.

By mid-October, the container port idea was dead. According to the city manager's report, "investment

groups are no longer interested in pursuing the new north shore port concept." These groups, which include J.P. Morgan, may wish to redevelop terminals along the south shore. The city manager's report stresses that new port investment "will be related to existing land and facilities rather than to a new facility." The demise of the north shore container port gives environmental groups a window of opportunity—before the city advances a new scheme.

Over a decade ago, the California Coastal Conservancy funded a specific plan for the north Richmond shoreline, with input from businesses, city staff, and enviros. The document tried to balance preservation of natural areas with development. There is more science just 15 years later about the bay and its wildlife, and after Katrina, a lot more understanding about why wetlands are so important ecologically and as natural flood control "sponges."

San Francisco-based nonprofit Natural Heritage Institute's Rich Walkling, who has been involved for several years in the North Richmond area, in particular on Rheem Creek and Breuner Marsh, has a CALFED grant (yet more state/federal money) to develop a grassroots vision. Walkling, working closely with Dotson's shoreline alliance, hopes to hold a series of workshops in early 2007 for people to get out in the field. "At the end of all of this, when we have this core group of people informed, we'll go through another planning and conservation process," he says. "We need to come up with examples of where cities have integrated economic development in a sustainable way that protects their natural resources—a giant container port doesn't do that. We'll come up with a vision for what the shoreline should look like—maybe a North Richmond Shoreline National Park."

Developer dollars are easier to come by than state and federal funding for parks these days. I ask Butt what he thinks it will take to save the shoreline. Shirley Butt jumps in. "Richmond always talks about being business-friendly," she says. "We need to tell developers we are seeking environmentally friendly businesses and start from there instead of always putting the environment second."

Tom Butt speaks of Richmond activists like Lucretia Edwards, who recently passed away in her nineties. He seems to be hoping for Edwards' reincarnation. "They were persistent, courted public opinion, used the media, and even litigated," he says of Edwards and her cohort of citizen activists. "They outlasted and outlived the opposition." If that legacy persists—and it seems likely to, with folks like Dotson and the shoreline alliance, the grassroots vision may, in the long run, prevail over ports, condos—and the City of Richmond's Development-a-Week. ❶

Dinos of the Sea Scramble to Survive



Critically endangered leatherback enjoys the sun in Bodega Bay on August 7, 2006.

All seven species of sea turtles are considered critically endangered by the World Conservation Union, but the precarious plight of the leatherback, the oldest and largest species, has conservationists especially alarmed. Karen Steele of the Sea Turtle Restoration Project says that the population has plummeted by over 95 percent, from 115,000 in 1980 to less than 3,000 nesting females in 2006. Steele worries that the big turtles may be only 5 to 30 years away from extinction.

Yet NOAA Fisheries is now considering a rollback of restrictions along the California and Oregon coast on fishing practices that catch and kill leatherbacks—drift gillnet and long-line fishing. Says Steele, "The reasons given are that there aren't as many sea turtles there as they thought, and that the restrictions affect the fishing industry adversely by limiting their catch." Many scientists—including Steele—vehemently oppose any rollback, pointing out that the small number of turtles now in residence simply reflects their dwindling

numbers globally. They say that the fishing industry has declined so much along the coast that it would gain next to nothing from the rollback, but the change could push the turtles over the edge to extinction.

Known as "the dinosaurs of the sea," leatherbacks have been around for 100 million years, since

before the time of *Tyrannosaurus rex* and friends. Picture a turtle the size of a table for eight swimming 22 mph and capable of diving down to 3,900 feet. The only shell-less turtle, they're named for their tough, leathery skin, which forms seven ridges along their backs. Because of their body's low surface area to volume and thick, insulating fat, they are the only warm-blooded reptiles. "They are amazing animals," concludes Steele.

Leatherbacks have been spotted as far north as Alaska and

as far south as Chile, says Steele. It's not uncommon for them to migrate 10,000 miles in a year or to cross an entire ocean basin, searching for nesting beaches and foraging for jellyfish. Moon jellyfish, with bells the size of dinner plates, are the turtles' favorites, and it takes about 50 a day to satisfy a leatherback.

"They spend their entire lives—and they can live to be 100—in the water," says Steele. "Nesting is the only activity that draws them out." The eastern leatherback population nests on beaches in Costa Rica, Mexico, and Nicaragua, while the western population nests in Indonesia, New Guinea, and Malaysia. Mating every two to three years, leatherbacks may lay up to 12 times at 10-day intervals in one season, for a total of 450 to 600 eggs. The nesting female clears a site using her front flippers like shovels, then digs a few feet down into the moist sand with her rear flippers before depositing her eggs and carefully filling in the hole. Hatchlings tunnel up through the sand, usually emerging after dusk, then scramble towards the water, attracted by moonlight reflected in the waves.

In late summer and fall, leatherbacks in search of jellyfish are spotted off the California coast between Monterey Bay and Oregon, says Steele. Satellite

tracking shows that they migrate in from western Pacific nesting beaches, like those of Papua Indonesia. "This year turtles have been seen north of the Golden Gate in the waters off Marin County—but in much smaller numbers than two decades ago," she says.

Leatherbacks face many threats, but chief among them are humans harvesting the eggs from nesting beaches and drift gillnet and long-line fishing. Drift gillnets, often a million square feet in size, are placed vertically like curtains to drift with the current and ensnare large fish. Long-line fisheries catch fish and sometimes turtles with 60-mile lines of baited hooks. Other hazards are plastic bottles and bags that leatherbacks may confuse with jellyfish, and developments near nesting beaches which, when lit up at night, draw hatchlings away from the water. Development of major nesting beaches around the Pacific has forced the population out to fewer, more far-flung areas.

"Conservationists have worked with western Pacific villagers to protect the turtle eggs, but that's hard," says Steele, "because the eggs have been important in the local economies, as well as a diet staple." Steele says the approach in the US has been to set up a Leatherback Conservation Area in the 200-mile-wide Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) between Monterey Bay and the mid-Oregon coast and to restrict drift gillnet fishing there from August 15 to November 15, when the leatherbacks tend to show up. This restriction was implemented in 2001 after a biological opinion was issued by NOAA Fisheries Service. In 2004, long-line fishing was restricted in the same way.

"These measures have been effective," notes Steele. "There has not been one sea turtle capture since 2001." If the restrictions are rolled back, drift gillnet vessels might be allowed in the EEZ during the critical period but would be required to have an observer on board at all times who would report any sea turtle captures. The vessels would have to move out of the critical area after two sea turtle captures in one season.

Some fear that this measure could lead to elimination of the Leatherback Conservation Area, with the result that only 20 percent of drift gillnet vessels would be required to carry an observer. Says Steele, "For now, we are urging the public to contact NOAA Fisheries Service and ask them to keep the existing restrictions in place." With leatherbacks near the brink, this is no time to give up. —Susan P. Williams

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