

LOCAL // POLITICS

SF groups to push for changes to major rezoning plan in SoMa

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A construction project is under way at Fourth and Folsom streets in San Francisco's SoMa neighborhood.

Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

One group wants more child care and recreation. Another is looking for more measures to fight gentrification. A third wants shorter buildings and less density. A fourth is pushing for taller buildings and more density.

All four groups will be before the San Francisco Board of Supervisors on Tuesday to appeal the city's biggest rezoning in nearly a decade: a reimagining of a portion SoMa that would bring 8,550 housing units and a projected 32,500 jobs to an area that runs from close to Market Street south to Townsend Street and from Second Street to Sixth Street.

The hearing Tuesday will focus on whether the project's 1,000-page environmental impact report — required under the California Environmental Quality Act — adequately studied the effect the

development will have on traffic, parking, shadows and air quality, along with potential displacements of current residents and businesses.

Two of the appeals come from South of Market community organizations: the Yerba Buena Neighborhood Consortium, an affiliate of the nonprofit housing owner Todco, and the South of Market Community Action Network, known as SOMCAN. A third comes from homeowners at the Blu SF condominium tower at 631 Folsom St. The final appeal — filed by One Vassar LLC, the developer of a proposed housing, office and hotel development at Second and Harrison streets — seeks more height and density.

While the Board of Supervisors generally rejects CEQA appeals, any of the four groups could stall the project for several years by filing a lawsuit if they lose Tuesday.

“We believe the EIR is absolutely solid — the impacts have been addressed appropriately,” city Planning Director John Rahaim said.

While the CEQA looks at the environmental impact caused by the dislocation of current residents — longer commutes and higher emissions, for example — it doesn’t address broader gentrification issues, such as higher market-rate housing prices and new, more expensive neighborhood businesses, which SOMCAN argues will hurt low-income communities in SoMa. Rahaim said that city planners have consistently found “there is no direct environmental impact created by market rate housing” — in other words that adding thousands of market-rate units into the SoMa mix won’t force out current residents, he said.

He said the stakes for the plan are high.

“We have millions of square feet of office space and thousands of units of housing in the pipeline that is waiting for this plan,” Rahaim said. “The combination of housing and office really brings a huge amount of public benefits to the neighborhood plus jobs and housing units the neighborhood desperately needs. There are several large projects essentially ready to go once the plan is passed.”

The plan is an effort to add workers and residents along the \$1.6 billion Central Subway corridor, an extension of the Muni T-Third line scheduled to open in December 2019. City planners also see the location as one of the few transit-friendly areas where building for new offices can be expanded.

The city planning staff estimates that the plan would generate \$2.2 billion in community benefits generated by development fees. Those include about 2,700 units of below-market-rate housing —

worth \$940 million — as well as 4 acres of open space.

There's also \$25 million for the renovation and expansion of the Gene Friend Recreation Center, a public swimming pool, and a new Flower Mart with permanently affordable rents for vendors. About \$500 million in fees would be spent over 25 years on local and regional transit, \$185 million for parks and recreation, \$180 million for industrial space, and \$110 million for neighborhood nonprofits that work with social services and housing.

Supervisor Jane Kim said her office has been in negotiations with all four appellants, and she expected talks to continue right up until the 3 p.m. hearing Tuesday.

"I am working with all the different parties to try to resolve the issues so that we can avoid litigation down the road," said Kim. "We have made progress on all fronts. Everybody has come to the table. I feel hopeful."

The Yerba Buena group argues that the rezoning should require more recreation space and child care facilities to meet the needs of the tens of thousands of new residents and workers who would fill the taller buildings allowed under the upzoning.

SOMCAN argues the plan doesn't take into account the impact that mostly wealthy, highly educated workers and residents will have on "the working class and communities of color in SoMa."

SOMCAN wants the city to buy rent-controlled buildings in the plan area, require that city-owned lots be developed with 100 percent affordable complexes and require market-rate developers of sites bigger than 1 acre to carve out a portion of the property for affordable housing. SOMCAN is calling for the housing in the plan area to be 50 percent affordable — the current plan calls for 33 percent.

The most contentious appeal is from attorney Richard Drury, on behalf of Central SoMa Neighbors and residents of the Blu SF condo tower, a 200-foot mid-rise at 631 Folsom St. They are threatening to sue because the plan allows three towers — two of 350 feet and one of 200 feet — at the nearby One Vassar project.

"The predominant character of SoMa as a mid-rise district should be retained, and the presence of high-rises reduced by limiting their distribution and bulk," the appeal states.

One Vassar would include up to 400 housing units, a 350-room hotel and a 350,000-square-foot office building. It would have a 12,000-square-foot day care center and 33,000 square feet of

industrial or arts space. About a third of the housing units would probably be below market rate.

One Vassar Development Director Sharon Lai said building squat, 130-foot-tall buildings doesn't make sense in an area so near the Financial District, BART, the Transbay Transit Center and the new Central Subway stop that will open next year at Fourth and Folsom streets.

Lai said it's not surprising that Blu owners want to protect their penthouse views but that "the position is a nonstarter."

"Their insistence on the 130 feet leaves us with not very much to discuss," Lai said. "Obviously the entire city recognizes that housing density is critical right now, and Central SoMa is one of the last places to look at that."

The One Vassar developers say they expect a lawsuit from Blu residents if that appeal is denied. So One Vassar filed its own appeal, which is legally required if they also wanted to sue.

One Vassar has the support of YIMBY Action, the pro-housing group, according to Executive Director Laura Clark. On both Friday and Monday, Clark and other YIMBY members handed out leaflets to Blu residents urging them to back One Vassar.

The appeals are the first in a series of Board of Supervisors votes on the matter. The final approvals are likely to come by early October.

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