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With latest edits, Seaport San Diego mega project aims to win over critics



A rendering of the Seaport San Diego project with a view of the water and promenade looking north, and the elevated walkway and observation tower in the background. (Courtesy, Seaport San Diego)

Revamped vision emphasizes how the public will be ushered into the waterfront expanse, afforded new opportunities for outdoor recreation and offered uninterrupted views of San Diego Bay.

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Four months after receiving less-than-glowing reviews on the latest rendition of its \$3.5 billion Seaport San Diego mega project, developer 1HWY1 is back with an edited proposal and a new story to tell.

Thursday, the developer will present Port of San Diego Commissioners with a revamped Seaport vision that emphasizes how the public will be ushered into the waterfront expanse, afforded countless new opportunities for outdoor recreation, and offered uninterrupted views of San Diego Bay along supersized promenades that create space for both pedestrians and cyclists. The developer will also stress a wealth of new vantage points engineered by the project's elevated walkways.

The narrative aims to push back against apprehensions that the project's many high-rises and hundreds of boat slips will overwhelm the land and water area known as downtown's Central Embarcadero.

Thursday's meeting is being characterized as a workshop, meaning the government agency won't take formal action on the project. Public testimony and commissioners' reactions will serve as a litmus test, signaling whether the developer, anxious to move into the environmental review phase before the end of the year, is on the right path.

Should all go well, concerns around the overall development footprint, which has been reduced by 100,000 square feet landside since commissioners last weighed in, will be abated and 1HWY1 will be encouraged to return to the board for preliminary approval.

"We've really worked hard over the last couple of months. I think we've taken the comments into account and even reduced where we think it's appropriate," said Yehudi "Gaf" Gaffen, who runs 1HWY1.

Backed in part by San Diego's famed Jacobs family, Seaport San Diego is a total reimagining of downtown's Central Embarcadero, which includes Seaport Village and follows the coast from Embarcadero Marina Park North to the G Street Mole, just south of the USS Midway Museum.

In November 2016, the port selected 1HWY1 to redevelop the subdistrict with hotels, attractions and retail shops. The parties have, since October 2017, been contractually tied through an exclusive negotiating agreement that has been extended multiple times and now runs through October 2024. In late December, 1HWY1 submitted a formal project description, triggering board review on March 8.

The project has morphed over the years. Most recently, at their latest meeting, commissioners were somewhat taken aback by the size, scale and intensity of the proposed redevelopment.

"If you look at the current status of Seaport Village compared to the 2016 concept, compared to 2021 concept, I think it's a bit of a spin to say (the project) has evolved. It has exploded," Commissioner Michael Zucchet said at the meeting. "Yes, it's mostly similar uses, but (the uses) have grown substantially — vertically, horizontally, waterside, landside — in every way. This is a very different view than has been depicted before and it's causing a reaction."

At the time, 1HWY1 was proposing to redevelop 105 acres of land and water area with 2.7 million square feet of mixed-use development. Today, the big-picture numbers are fairly similar — but the developer has edited its plan in ways that may be consequential.

The program still envisions a total of 2,058 hotel rooms spread across seven properties — including 400 rooms inside the 500-foot, cylindrical observation tower. There's still 229,213 square feet of retail and restaurant space.

But docking space has been paired down from 366 slips to 265 slips. And the office tower reserved for ocean research-related enterprises has been shrunk to 320 feet in height and 220,000 square feet in size, compared with 380 feet and 308,524 square feet. One of the hotels has also been redesigned with a smaller footprint and less conference space to make the adjacent area feel more open.

More importantly, the new Seaport story now starts at the water's edge, where the developer maintains that open spaces will grow instead of contract.

The project's total recreational open space now stands at 16 acres, with wider walkways and buildings nudged further away from the bay adding an acre of space for people to move about.

When matched against existing on-the-ground conditions, there is no comparison, the developer says.

“The (promenade) of tomorrow ... is much, much wider. It’s up to 100 feet,” Gaffen said. “We’ve tried to create zones for different activities so the public can use it safely whether you’re walking, whether you want to lay out a blanket on the lawn or whether you want to bicycle. We really see these different areas for different activities, which I think is going to make it memorable and interesting.”

The promenade, he said, will be a contiguous path extending the length of the project site, with an average width three times greater than today’s 20-foot, on average, pedestrian walkway. It’s meant to connect bigger spaces to smaller spaces while providing a continuum of experiences.

“Based on the commissioner comments, we felt this element kind of got lost,” said Alex Buggy, who is a senior project manager. “They felt like some of the development was right on top of the water. And we want to highlight how far away (the buildings are) from the water. We want to be abundantly clear.”

The developer plans to present a bevy of new renderings to show the breadth of open space and public amenities.

1HWY1 will, for instance, use the workshop to highlight an internal analysis of water views. There’s an increase of 1.3 miles of new water views that don’t exist today, Gaffen said. There will also be additional emphasis on unique features that may have been glossed over before, such as an extensive elevated walkway, steps overlooking a new-and-relocated Ruocco Park and a living shoreline adjacent to an urban beach.

Ultimately, the developer hopes to address the commissioners’ biggest criticism — that Seaport San Diego is too much — by suggesting that the project isn’t as large as it seems; that it fits nicely in an area that should be busy with activity.

“We still believe this is the best site in the country right now and should be developed out,” Gaffen said. “We’re hopeful that the commissioners will agree.”