

Residents seek to preserve Richmond marina of floating homes, boats

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Peter Thelin leaves his office at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory every day and commutes 2 hours to his boat docked at the Point San Pablo Yacht Harbor.

Just north of the old Point Molate Naval Fuel Depot in Richmond, the harbor is a colorful collection of floating homes and bobbing boats. Surrounded by wooded hillsides and the water. Quiet except for the seabirds. Accessible by bumpy, windy road. One way in, one way out.

The 50 or so residents are a diverse bunch: mechanics, contractors, computer engineers, retired doctors, opticians and real estate experts. They are drawn here to be close to the water and by the simultaneous isolation from and proximity to the city.

"We planned to live here temporarily and then move back to Alameda, where it would be half the commute. That was three years ago," Thelin said. "You know your neighbors; they know you. You don't lock your doors."

They fear it will disappear.

Private parties including Chevron want to buy the property and have made overtures, residents say. They fear a new owner would scrap the harbor because maintenance and repairs are pricey, evict the tenants and block the public from Point San Pablo. Doing so would cut access to the historic East Brother Lighthouse, a bed and breakfast perched on an island that has been reachable only by boat from the harbor for 30 years. It also would make it hard to complete the planned public biking and walking trail that is to encircle the Bay, they added.

Residents have formed the nonprofit Point San Pablo Preservation Society and asked public agencies for help. The City of Richmond is paying half the cost to appraise the property, which consists of 15 acres of mostly uplands and 15 acres of water and docks. The East Bay Regional Park District is spending \$10,000 to study what role the harbor could play in the region.

Ideally, the preservation society would partner with a public or nonprofit entity to buy the property, said Robert Edney, group president. The society would manage the harbor and provide public access for fishing, kayaking, picnicking and other activities. The group also is looking at opening a Point San Pablo history museum and outdoor nature program with special programs for at-risk youth.

"We are right at the interface between land and water. It really gives you an appreciation for the Bay," Edney said. "To me, it's irreplaceable. You're a very short distance out of urban Richmond and yet you can't see anything but a harbor building."

Chevron property surrounds the harbor. The road that connects the harbor to Point Molate sits partially on a Chevron easement. Brent Tippen, spokesman for the Richmond refinery, said the company does not comment on real estate negotiations.

The harbor is both public and private. The San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission, which oversees construction, dredging and other activities in the Bay, has declared that about 45,000 square feet along the shoreline is public. The BCDC permit for the harbor also calls for building plazas, a trail, overlook areas and interpretive signs.

A new owner would not necessarily be tied to the same permit, but changes made to the property would need to follow BCDC guidelines and cause no damage to the Bay, said Bob Batha, the agency's permit chief. No law prevents a new owner from closing the harbor.

Harbor owner Eric Johnson is open to selling. When he bought the land in 2001, he and his wife spent a year purging it of methamphetamine labs and vandals who burned tires at night and dragged payphones and newsracks here to ransack them for money inside.

But he said the physical challenge of guarding the property, sometimes with guns, hasn't been as difficult as dealing with multiple agencies and their regulations and other entities who want all or part of the land.

"I'm weary of the politics," Johnson said. "It's a tough torch to bear."

Johnson said he isn't willing to sell the property to just anyone. Nor would he want a new owner to shut down the harbor and shut out the residents, he said.

"Would you?" he asked.

Point San Pablo was discovered by accident in the 1920s by a lost sea captain seeking shelter from a Christmas Day storm, said Thelin, who is the preservation society's historian. The captain dredged the cove, and sunk and tied eight wooden schooners end-to-end in a ring to form the breakwater.

The peninsula bustled in its early years. Bass fishermen flocked to the water in droves in the 1940s. A whaling station churned out Moby Dick Whale Meat and was the last whaling station in North America until it closed in 1976. A fire destroyed the facility in 1989.

The area captured Hollywood's attention. Portions of the 1955 movie "Blood Alley" starring John Wayne and Lauren Bacall was filmed here.

A 1980 aerial photo shows the 212 slips nearly full. The small restaurant near the harbor's entrance -- first serving French fare, later Chinese food -- used to serve locals and Chevron workers who stopped by, Clark said.

Today, the yacht harbor is a quieter place. Johnson's diligence for ousting strangers has successfully chased away vandals, dopers and thieves, but visitors who want to fish and explore also stay away, residents say. About half the slips are empty. The restaurant is closed.

Johnson said he hasn't had the funds to build the plazas, waterfront garden and other projects outlined in the BCDC permit and has been granted extensions. The preservation society wants the permit completed.

If the land were owned by a public or nonprofit entity, the harbor could seek grants and other revenue that a private landowner may not. The money could be used to make the additions and fix the harbor, including repairing levees and dredging the property so floating homes don't sit in mud in low tide.

The harbor has been the access point to the East Brother Lighthouse for 30 years, said Councilman Tom Butt, who heads the foundation that manages the lighthouse built in 1874.

"We would lose our access (if the harbor closed). There are other possibilities but they could be very expensive and they would involve entitlements that aren't in place now," Butt said.

Stephen Clark has lived at the harbor for 15 years aboard a boat he spent two years building using wood from an old Petaluma barn. He stood on the levee near sunset, taking in a sprawling vista that stretches from Point Molate to Marin County to Vallejo to Hercules and back to Richmond.

"We feel for ourselves and the public that the harbor is in danger. And we think it needs to be preserved, for everyone," Clark said.

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