

A place known for harboring quirkiness

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John Kingham strode along the wobbly, rotting dock at Point San Pablo Yacht Harbor and lovingly surveyed his neighborhood of the past two decades - the rusty dredging machinery, the abandoned half-sunken boats, the pickups on blocks.

"This is a good place to hide," said the retired commercial fisherman, who added that he was drawn to the harbor to escape law enforcement decades ago. "There's one way in, one way out. If the police are coming, you can see 'em."

He adjusted his woolen captain's cap and climbed aboard his home, a rickety World War II-era trawler. "And," he said, "there's that pirate allure."

Beyond the Richmond Bridge, tucked behind the Chevron refinery, 4 miles down a perilously rutted road, is a houseboat enclave that is the antithesis of cute. Sausalito it ain't.

Now the Point San Pablo Yacht Harbor, beloved by its 30 or so residents and biker clubs everywhere, is under threat of extinction if a rumored sale to Chevron goes through. Chevron, which surrounds the harbor on three sides, reportedly has offered to buy the harbor with the intention of scrapping it, cleaning the 27-acre property and closing it to the public as a security measure.

A Chevron spokesman did not return calls Tuesday, but Richmond City Councilman Tom Butt confirmed that Chevron has expressed interest in the property.

To preserve the isolated, ragtag community, residents have formed a nonprofit organization to purchase the harbor themselves and maintain its dilapidated charm. The city of Richmond has kicked in \$6,000 to help pay for an appraisal, and the East Bay Regional Park District has paid \$10,000 to amend the 2004 Point San Pablo Open Space Study to include preservation of the harbor.

"If it's going to be sold, it should be preserved as a working yacht harbor, with open space and shoreline access," Butt said, adding that the harbor is ultimately intended to be the terminus of the Bay Trail and includes the dock used for shore access by the East Brother Island Lighthouse keeper.

The price of the harbor appears to be negotiable. Kingham said the harbor has been on the market since the day Eric Johnson bought it for \$920,000 seven years ago. Johnson was out of town and couldn't be reached. Chevron reportedly has offered several million for it, under the condition that Johnson remove the six docks, three buildings, a dozen or so junked cars, piles of tires and about 200 boats, a third of which are abandoned. Demolition, hauling and dump fees alone would probably top \$1 million, one resident estimated.

"In the 20 years I've lived here, this place has not changed at all," Kingham said. "In 20 years it'll probably be the same - still for sale."

Business faded away

Built in the early 20th century, the harbor originally was filled with commercial fishing vessels, gradually converting to houseboats and recreational boats as the fishing business tapered off. The buildings - a restaurant, clubhouse and residence - were constructed from dismantled ferry boats and schooners.

Because of laws governing the bay shoreline, development is strictly limited, leaving the owner with few options but to operate the 230-slip harbor exactly as it is.

The residents include an optometrist, a retired police officer, teacher, contractors, commercial fishermen and tugboat operators, veterans and retirees. What they have in common: a fanatical respect for privacy, and an exceeding tolerance of eccentricity.

"It's a bunch of old renegades who found a home," said Stephen Clark, a 15-year resident who lives aboard a boat he made from a redwood barn from Petaluma and a San Francisco fishing boat. "Here, if you're sort of weird, you can drop your facade and come join the fray."

Kingham recalled one resident, a retired colonel, who was chased around the harbor by a prostitute wielding a butcher knife. Another time, an especially dispirited resident tied himself to the mast of his sinking boat. But because the harbor had not been dredged in so long, the boat only sank a few feet and the man was left affixed to the mast, dry and very cranky the next morning.

'Craziness' common

"There's constantly some kind of craziness," Kingham said. "Let me put it this way: The people here are generally not normal. Everyone has, well, let's call it a twist."

Nonresidents also appreciate the harbor's charm. The quiet, wildlife, isolation and sweeping views of the Marin and Sonoma shoreline provide a much-needed respite from the stress of urban life, visitors said Tuesday. Cait Rivers of Point Richmond, who was walking along the adjacent beach, called the harbor "a gem."

"There's such a great balance here between grit and natural beauty," she said. "It's really a metaphor for the real world."

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