

Spate of new development marks Richmond's growth

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RICHMOND -- After years of stagnation, Richmond is experiencing a construction boom, with more than a dozen commercial and residential projects in the pipeline.

The planned developments, many of them clustered along Richmond's shoreline, underscore the excitement many developers, real estate agents and city officials feel, as land around the Bay Area becomes more scarce and real estate prices soar.

The new residential projects include at least three in the tony Marina Bay neighborhood, including 250 townhouses and live-work units at 830 Marina Way and 59 single-family homes on South Marina Way, a project developers have called the "Richmond Riviera." Another is a plan to build some 250 luxury condominiums at a former Port of Richmond terminal, southwest of Point Richmond, a wealthy enclave of the city. The project will include the development of 1½ acres of city park and a portion of the Bay Trail, a multiuse path for pedestrians and cyclists.

"There is a strong interest in locating in Richmond because of its proximity to the rest of the Bay Area," said Richard Mitchell, Richmond's director of planning.

At least three of the planned residential developments are considered "affordable," meaning residents won't have to pay more than 30 percent of their income. These include a 300-unit apartment complex at Nevin Avenue and 21st Street, now going through the design process; 155 apartments on Central Avenue in the Richmond Annex, recently approved; and 80 senior apartments on South 45th Street and Florida Avenue. Funding for the last site is on hold pending release of funding from the redevelopment successor agency, which the city expects by the end of the year.

In addition, 186 new homes are planned for the Hilltop mall area, and city planners hope the site will encourage new business at the commercial center, which has struggled with high vacancy rates. Three new charter schools are also opening next fall: Aspire in the Hilltop neighborhood and Amethod elementary and high schools on Marina South Way.

On the commercial front, crews are working on a 500,000-square-foot distribution center on Atlas Road, which will also include 40,000 square feet of office space. Across the street at Pinole Point Regional Business Park, Whole Foods recently opened a large freezer warehouse, and two other buildings are under construction, a site totaling more than 600,000 square feet.

In recent years, many of the new businesses that have moved to Richmond have been food manufacturers, including Galaxy Desserts, health food company Nutiva and Artisan Food Co.

"What we're hearing from the distribution community is that they are choosing us because there is much easier access to other cities from here than other locations," Mitchell said. "As far as housing, we would certainly invite more, and our general plan allows for a great deal more."

One challenge for the city is getting more housing that complies with its general plan, a guiding document that calls for more densely built housing, such as apartments, said Mayor Tom Butt. Building apartment complexes and live-work units is more expensive, and many developers shy away from pursuing them.

"Developers tend to 'bottom feed' in Richmond, pawing off poorly designed, suburban scale projects in locations that are projected for higher densities," Butt said.

But Richard Poe, founder of Virtual Development Corp., which is trying to develop the Richmond Riviera homes, criticized the city for pushing projects residents don't want.

"We did a survey that found that 67 percent of residents preferred low-density housing," Poe said. "There is a conflict between what the residents want and what the mayor and the planning director want."

He also said the city could endeavor to be "more business friendly."

"If they want to take advantage of the market, they need to streamline the process," Poe said. "If they continue to take as long as they do, we will be in the next recession by the time projects are actually approved."

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