

[‘15-minute city’: One of S.F.’s biggest developments finally set to break ground](#)

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A new carbon-neutral Bay Area community is in motion, built from scratch with more than 10,000 residents, 20,000 well-paying jobs, hundreds of acres of open space and a solar farm big enough to provide 70% of the power the neighborhood requires.

It almost sounds like the sort of sustainable utopian city Silicon Valley investors are planning for farmland in the eastern half of Solano County. But it's not. Rather, it's the 660-acre Baylands project on the San Francisco-Brisbane border, home of the once mighty Schlage Lock factory and former rail yards.

Nearly four years after the pandemic brought it to a halt, one of San Francisco's longest-simmering and greenest projects is back on course, a 660-acre redevelopment that will include nearly 4,000 homes, 6.5 million square feet of commercial space, 90 acres of solar panels and 140 acres of parks.

Baylands CEO Greg Vilkin hopes to start construction next year on phase one, which will consist of six buildings, 594 housing units, two parks, a renovated Bayshore Caltrain station

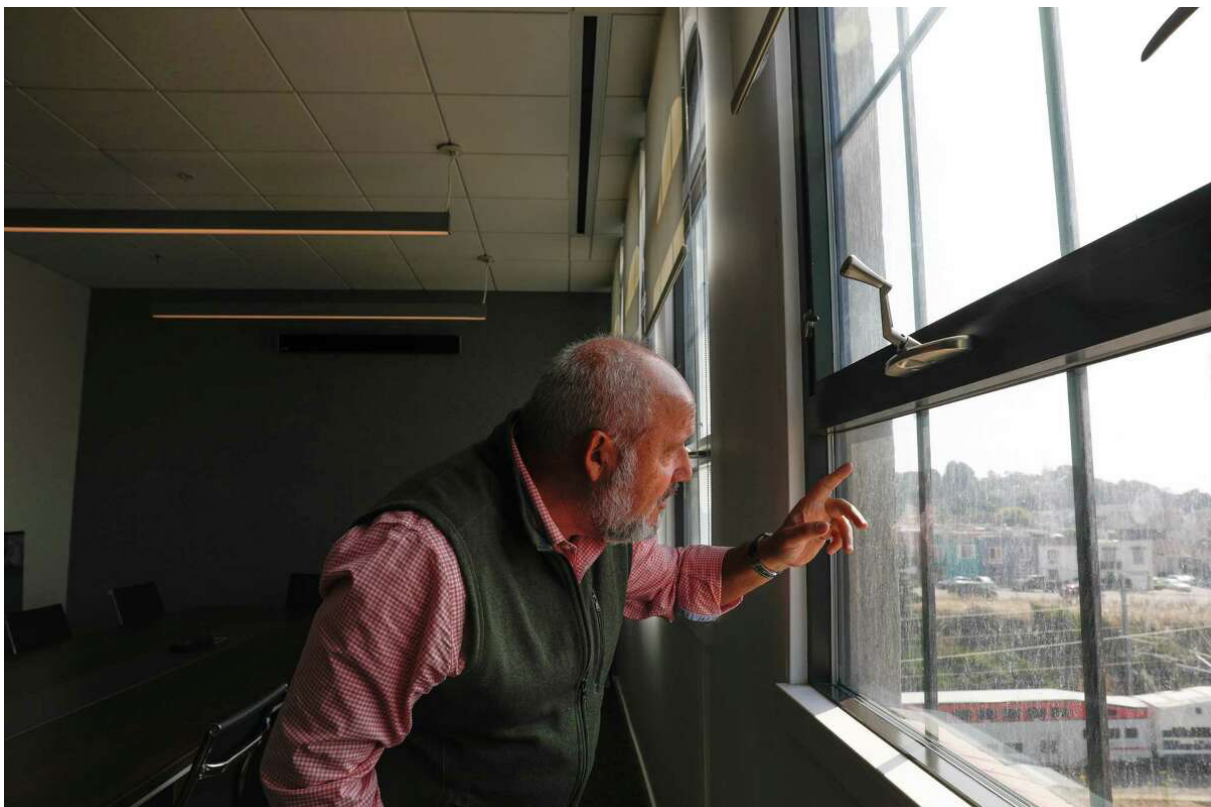
and a pedestrian-oriented retail strip. Already, the group has completed the \$11 million renovation of the old Schlage Lock headquarters and spent \$35 million on cleanup, building in a storm drain system, and cutting the “pads” for the first apartment buildings.

“We don’t have sticks in the air yet, but we have done a ton of development work,” said Vilkin.

Vilkin, who led the redevelopment of an old airport in Denver into housing, is evangelical in his advocacy of what he considers to be an urbanist dream: the metamorphosis of a toxic landfill and a shuttered lock factory into a walkable, bikable neighborhood near a Caltrain station and the T-Third Muni streetcar line with 140 acres of open space and an 80-acre lagoon where neighbors can lounge or paddleboard.

It will be carbon neutral, with a 55-acre solar farm and another 35 acres of solar panels atop buildings and garages. The batteries of a fleet of 500 electric cars, available to residents, will be tapped into for power when not on the road.

While the so-called “15-minute city” model has been criticized by some conservatives, Vilkin makes no apologies. “If you don’t want to live in a walkable, sustainable community, we are not your place,” he said. “We are all-in on the 15-minute city. If those things are important to you, come here. If they are not important to you, there are a lot of other options. We are not forcing it on anyone.”



Vilkin said he has been watching, with interest, the evolving proposal for creating a city on 50,000 acres of agricultural land in Solano County. He says he likes the sentiment and ambition behind that effort, but thinks it's in the wrong place. Rather than occupying farmland they should follow Bayland's plan and use "brownfield" areas — obsolete toxic properties that already have public transit and infrastructure.

"All of the things they espouse we are actually doing," said Vilkin. "We think a lot of the things they are talking about are the right things to do, but we think it's unfortunate that they have chosen a greenfield to do it."

The evolution of the Baylands project has evolved sporadically since 1999, when the Schlage Lock factory, which had employed more than 1,000 workers, shut down. There were numerous setbacks along the way. Neighborhood opposition killed a plan to put a Home Depot there in 2003, while a 1,200-unit development fizzled in 2011 when former Gov. Jerry Brown ended the state's redevelopment program.

By 2018 the property owner had won approval for the current project: 1,674 units on the 20-acre Schlage Lock site and 2,200 homes on the Brisbane side, along with 6.5 million square feet of biotech and office space, which was approved by voters in 2018. That project was ready to start construction in 2020 when the pandemic hit and the developer lost financing.

While the restored Schlage Lock building is a tiny speck on the sprawling redevelopment, it's taken on an outside role in the redevelopment. Baylands has moved its offices there, and 11,000 square feet of the building is being used as a community center.



For Vilkin and his team, moving into the refurbished office building has been a catalyst for the project. Before the move, the Baylands staff worked out of an office at Executive Park. Now, from his corner office — formerly the office of Schlage Lock’s chief executive — Vilkin looks out over the expansive wedge of dirt and warehouses that runs along the Caltrain tracks from San Francisco’s southern edge to the Brisbane Lagoon.

“There we were looking at pictures,” said Vilkin. “Now we look at the site 100 times a day. It makes the project real. We are here. We walk down to Leland Street for lunch every day.”

Meanwhile, the old Schlage Lock building is quickly becoming a neighborhood hub. The building has 11,000 square feet of community space that Visitacion Valley nonprofit Asian Pacific American Community Center used in the summer for its 50-kid camp. Rex Tabora, the group’s executive director, said he has been involved in planning the Baylands project for a dozen years, but he is starting to believe it’s going to happen.

“I’ve read so many articles saying, ‘Hey, they are going to start construction,’ and then it fizzles out, and it’s the same old dirt lot as always,” said Tabora. “But this time I think it’s real. The neighborhood really needs it. We need a positive shot in the arm.”



Along with megaprojects like Treasure Island, Pier 70 and Potrero Power, the Baylands project needs to get going in order for San Francisco to meet its state-mandated housing requirements of permitting 82,000 units by 2031, according to city officials.

“The rebirth of the historic office building on Bayshore is a significant first step and fulfills a long-standing community promise,” said Judson True, Mayor London Breed’s director of housing delivery. “We’re working closely with the project team to find creative solutions to start construction on the almost 1,700 new homes on this transit-rich site that will help make San Francisco more affordable and meet our housing goals.”

Vilkin acknowledges that there is no financing for the first phase of the project, but says Universal Paragon, the Baylands’ parent company, is committed to investing its own money as a “loss leader” in the first phase. It helps that the owner is able to generate about \$20 million a year from temporary uses on the property, which include heavy material recycling and bus and rental car storage.

“I can afford to say I’m not going to make money in the first phase because I’m going to roll it out over time,” he said.

In addition, the developer is looking at working with the city to create an infrastructure financing district, which will allow the project to borrow against future tax revenue to pay for it, according to Stephanie Shakofsky, Baylands senior vice president of government affairs.

“We are looking at all the incentives the city is putting out on the street,” said Shakofsky.

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