



Port approves Seaport redeveloper



A 480-foot observation tower, aquarium, three hotels and new promenades and public spaces would highlight Seaport San Diego, a \$1.3 billion replacement for Seaport Village. (AVRP Skyport Studios)

 By **Roger Showley · Contact Reporter**

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A bicoastal team of specialty developers won final approval from the [San Diego Unified](#) Port District Tuesday to redevelop Seaport Village.

“Seaport San Diego,” a \$1.2 billion venture to be built over the next decade, would include a 480-foot observation tower; partially underground aquarium; three hotels; shops and restaurants; 30 acres of new parkland, beach and promenades; and upgraded facilities for commercial fishing fleets and pleasure craft.

“I think San Diego is on the edge of a major renaissance,” said Yehudi “Gaf” Gaffen, who leads the development team. “I think this project is going to be part of it. It will be transformative to downtown. It’s really going to turn San Diego into America’s finest city. We’ve called it that but I really don’t think we’ve believed it, but now it’s real.”

The developer team, operating as 1HWY1, includes newly formed Protea Waterfront Development, consisting of Gaffen’s Gafcon construction management firm, and Jeff Jacobs and Jeff Essakow, owners of the Rancho Valencia hotel in Rancho Santa Fe; RCI Marine Group, a marina developer and operator in Miami; OdySea, a Scottsdale, Ariz.-based aquarium developer; and ThrillCorp, the Orlando, Fla.-based developer of the tower to be called SkySpire.

The hotels with 1,075 rooms would include San Diego’s first Virgin-branded property, a Yotel with 350 “micro-rooms” and a 225-room, 475-bed Freehand hostel.

If all goes as hoped, the project could start construction in 2020 and be completed in phases between 2022 and 2025. Gaffen said he hopes major portions are ready in case the 2024 Olympics comes to Los Angeles and sailing events are held on San Diego Bay.

The port stands to receive \$22 million annually in rent by the 10th year, compared \$2.5 currently from 36-year-old Seaport Village.

Other elements, which are subject to change as the development evolves over the next eight months, would include:

- Shops and restaurants: 390,000 square feet, more than four times the space at Seaport Village,
- Offices: 19,000 square feet for marine-oriented businesses
- A maritime-oriented educational institute: a 65,000-square-foot facility originally proposed as a 600-student charter school but now aimed at students of all ages.
- Tuna Harbor: 10,670 linear feet of marinas docks — enough to accommodate 51 commercial fishing slips, 82 recreational boat slips and 24 mega-yacht slips; and,
- Parking: 2,845 spaces, mostly located in two underground levels covering most of the building site at the foot of Pacific Highway and Kettner Boulevard.

Port Commissioner Dan Malcolm, as well as the five other board members present, lauded the development team and its vision.

“The project components were bold, creative, compelling, iconic, dynamic and well thought out,” Malcolm said.

Chairman Marshall Merrifield said he wants to make sure the project elements “come out of the ground” as substantially proposed and not cut back by 25 percent or more because of financing issues.

Members of the public also cheered the project, although one speaker, Katheryn Rhodes, a civic engineer, warned the team about potential earthquake faults.

Gaffen said that is the biggest unknown at the moment and could cause the biggest changes to the master plan if streets and building sites have to be rearranged.

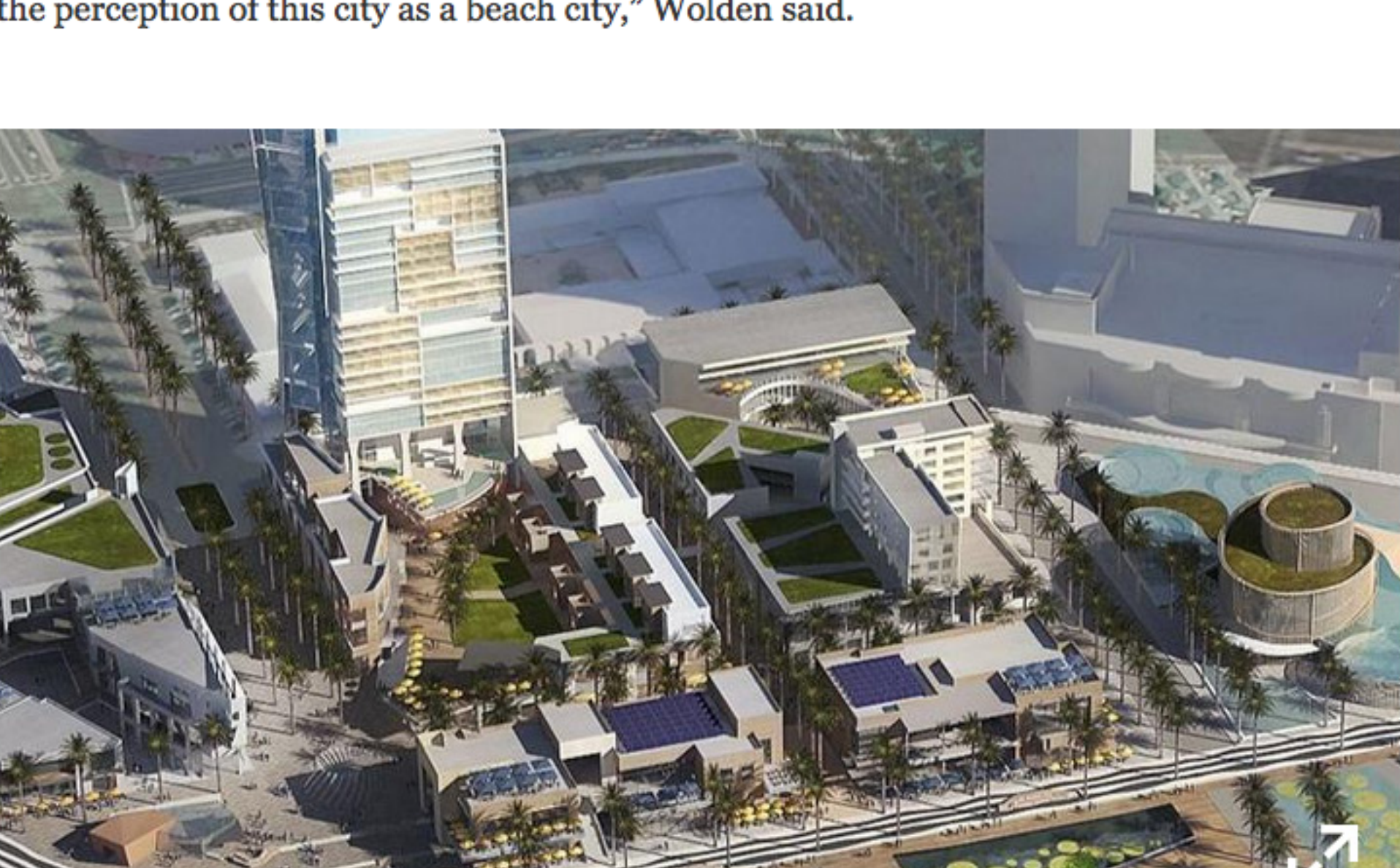
Seaport Village, opened in 1980 on the site of the San Diego-[Coronado](#) ferry landing, is operated by Terramar Retail Centers, whose lease expires in September 2018. The company will retain its leasehold at the adjacent Headquarters restaurant-shopping complex.

1HWY1, which beat out five other bidders for the project in July, hopes to keep some of the Seaport Village tenants in business through construction and find room for them in the new development.

However, many steps remain before construction can begin, including winning approval from the California Coastal Commission.

The project architects, AVRP Skyport Studios principals Randy Robbins and Frank Wolden, said they want to create a “district,” not an isolated, stand-alone development.

“This project is one that can connect, psychologically, the urban center of the town back to the perception of this city as a beach city,” Wolden said.



The Virgin Hotel high-rise, located in the center of the project, sits next to two low-rise hotels and, to the right, an aquarium with a rooftop garden. (AVRP Skyport Studios)

Currently, Seaport Village’s trees, buildings and parking lots block an unobstructed view to the bay.

The new design would open up southern vistas down Pacific Highway and Kettner and beckon downtown residents, workers and hotel guests down its pedestrian pathways to the waterfront.

The next big idea is to sprinkle big and little attractions and spaces throughout the 70-acre Central Embarcadero.

The observation tower, for example, would replace Ruocco Park with a larger public space and incorporate historic photos and references that could be enjoyed without buying a ticket to ride on gondolas up the tower.

“I think it’s going to be an original for San Diego and something iconic the city can be really proud of,” Wolden said of the tower.

The hotels will be designed to welcome local residents as well as paying guests by putting public spaces on the ground floor and making it easy for guests to mingle with the public in bars, restaurants and lounges.



Embarcadero Marina Park North would be regraded to include a beach. (AVRP Skyport Studios)

Besides the new buildings, the team’s plan calls for a complete makeover of Embarcadero Marina Park North into a sports and recreation zone. It would be accessed via a new shop-lined pedestrian street, California Paseo, an extension of Kettner Boulevard.

The water’s edge of the manmade peninsula would be regraded to include a sandy beach. Dock-and-dine piers would serve boaters who could tie up while they eat and shop.

At the foot of Pacific Highway would be a wide open plaza, Pacific Place, and offshore, a floating stage for concerts and watching movies on a giant screen.

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