

Written by Administrator
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Instead of thousands of slot machines, imagine rows upon rows of pot growing in Richmond's historic waterfront buildings. That's the only financially feasible alternative to a Las Vegas-style casino-hotel resort among 28 ideas submitted by the public that would rake in enough cash to cover development costs and then some at Point Molate, according to a consultant's report.

The scenario calls for medical marijuana to be grown, packaged, stored and sold within the century-old buildings where the Winehaven winery flourished in the early 1900s before Prohibition. City coffers would swell with \$3.2 million a year in tax revenue, under a 5 percent tax rate depending on how much the cannabis is worth, according to the report, which

reviews possible alternatives for Point Molate.

"Only medical cannabis would result in an ability to pay market price for the Point Molate property," the report concluded.

But a giant pot farm would be rife with legal hurdles. Marijuana remains illegal under federal law, raising questions about whether the idea is viable, the report said. Point Molate, with its sweeping waterfront views of the Bay, could be put to better use.

And the report itself -- funded by the group proposing the casino -- is drawing critics who blast it for purposefully forwarding an untenable idea in order to make the casino project look better.

City Councilman Tom Butt said the consultant was "paid by (casino developer) Upstream and pandered

to their client loyally, coming up with a fatally flawed report that rivaled the (project's) EIR in the worst garbage competition category."

The report is part of a process launched in August, when the city solicited ideas for alternatives to the \$1.2 billion casino-hotel resort. The casino project is proposed by Upstream and the Guidiville Band of Pomo Indians with financial backing from Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, which owns the Cache Creek Casino Resort.

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of Berkeley was selected to study the alternatives and determine which are the most viable. The selection process was overseen by the city with input from Upstream, which funded the \$50,000 contract.

A public meeting is scheduled 7 p.m. Wednesday at 440 Civic Center Plaza to discuss the findings, before a full report reaches the City Council in early December.

Jim Levine, Upstream's managing partner, dismissed Butt's criticism. It's easy to blame the process when the alternatives don't pencil out, he said.

"The alternatives report echoed what anybody familiar with the real estate market will tell you," Levine said. "Unless you get a motivated wealthy single user like Oracle or Google or Microsoft to want to come in and adopt a site, it's a tough site in the real estate world. We need realistic economic development."

Upstream is not interested in building a marijuana operation at Point Molate because of the legal questions, Levine added.

Point Molate has sat primarily vacant since the Naval Fuel Depot closed in 1995. Although heavy duty cleanup will be required, city leaders see the 422-acre waterfront property as a place where much-needed economic development could bring jobs and revenue to the city.

Whether that economic development will be a casino is another story. Voters have chimed in, with 57.5 percent voting no on advisory Measure U, which asked whether the casino should be built. In the council race, voters replaced incumbents Myrna

Lopez and Maria

Viramontes with challengers Jovanka Beckles and Corky Booze, creating a council majority that opposes the casino. The new council members take office Jan. 11.

The City Council holds the fate of the casino project, because it needs to certify the environmental impact report and finalize contracts with the developer.

Of the 28 public submittals for alternatives in August, the consultant found 11 to be similar to the five alternatives listed in a previously studied draft environmental report and nixed them. Five ideas, including a university and baseball stadium, lacked funding, sufficient land or other resources to get them off the ground, the report said.

Among the other ideas, an industrial office park would

bring \$164,000 a year to the general fund; and a residential-commercial development built using green construction methods, an urban farming component and powered by renewable energy at the site would generate \$1.1 million annually. However, the report said neither of those projects would generate enough revenue to cover development costs in the near future, though that could change as the economy improves.

Critics had argued the alternatives process was flawed from the start. No developer with a legitimate plan would submit it as long as the city is under contract with Upstream, they argued.

Butt said he submitted comments, including moving a 4,000-space parking garage to the south to save historic buildings, that were not included in the report.

City officials and the consultant have said the analysis would be fair and Upstream would not be able to veto feasible ideas. Levine said he saw a draft of the report, as the city did, and submitted comments, but said that was the extent of his company's role beyond funding it.

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