

SF gentrification pushes lower-income residents into radioactive areas

Treasure Island and Hunters Point, two derelict and contaminated Navy hubs, are key to city's affordable housing plan

June 4, 2015 by [Toshio Meronek](#) AL JAZEERA AMERICA



A view of San Francisco's Treasure Island, looking west from a hill located on Avenue H and Sixth Street. More than a third of the population is formerly homeless. Carlos Chavarría

SAN FRANCISCO — The Hunters Point Shipyard and its annex at Treasure Island were once used to clean boats returning from nuclear-weapons testing in the Pacific. Now they will soon be the sites of much-needed affordable housing stock in a city where high demand and speculation have produced explosive gentrification and displacement. Renderings for the new neighborhoods are attractively designed, picturing modern shopping areas, parks with eco-friendly low-water shrubs, and the *pièce de résistance*: sweeping views of the San Francisco Bay.

The illustrations, of course, leave out the black-and-yellow radioactive warning signs that litter the parcels of land where cleanup is still underway.

The former military bases have been a key part of the city government's strategy to house lower-income residents. On Treasure Island, more than a third of the population is formerly homeless.

“Very talented people both in the city hall and the private sector are looking for ways to accelerate the creation of affordable housing,” said Kofi Bonner, who oversees land acquisition for Lennar Corporation, which convinced the city government to approve its bids to redevelop Treasure Island in 2003 and the Hunters Point Shipyard in 2014. Lennar, one of the country's largest homebuilders, is among the top 10 spenders on lobbying local politicians, according to San Francisco Ethics Commission data.

In negotiating its contract with the city, one of Lennar's concessions was a higher-than-usual ratio of affordable to market rate housing. But affordable-housing advocates aren't excited about sending lower-income people to two derelict navy hubs where lingering radiation is a concern, especially given past lawsuits against the development company.

Lennar has made a fortune from converting former military bases into cookie-cutter subdivisions, but in 2008 homeowners in a Lennar development uncovered more than a hundred World War II-era bombs and rockets, many still live, inside their brand-new Florida neighborhood.

The Navy promises a better cleanup job than the Army did in Florida, and the city is offering subsidies to help make homes more affordable to people who might otherwise be pushed out of San Francisco. "In this particular situation, I think everything should be on the table," Bonner said, lauding the city's decision to foot some of the bill for the affordable homes.

Talking to the media, Bonner is quick to mention the affordability crisis, and comes off as more politically savvy than his onetime boss, former San Francisco mayor Willie Brown, whose famous quip about high housing costs in the Bay Area ("If you don't make \$50,000 a year in San Francisco, then you shouldn't live here") got him into trouble with liberal-leaning voters. Born to a wealthy family in Kumasi, Ghana, Bonner spent most of his early years in England. He currently resides a half-hour's drive east of the Bay, in posh Walnut Creek, a town that ranks in the top 20 for highest incomes in the U.S.

Prior to helming these military base makeovers, the well-connected Bonner also worked alongside current San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee. But he might be best known for his work as redevelopment director for nearby Emeryville, California, where he fought and won a battle against Native American activists who had hoped to save a culturally and spiritually significant burial site. The Ohlone Shellmound has since been paved over, and serves as an outdoor shopping mall for chain stores such as H&M, Ikea and Uniqlo.



Inside a housing complex on the northwest corner of Treasure Island. San Francisco approved Lennar Urban's bid to redevelop the island based on a concession that there be a higher-than-usual ratio of affordable to market rate housing. Carlos Chavarría

Residents of Hunters Point and Treasure Island pull no punches when it comes to the past actions of Lennar and local officials who are friendly with the company, including mayors Brown and Lee. In a lawsuit against the company, Christopher Muhammad, a local minister for the Nation of Islam, called Lennar “a rogue company that can’t be trusted.” The asbestos-related suit cited Lennar’s construction in Hunters Point as the cause of the neighborhood’s high asthma rates in children, an issue around which the city eventually created a special task force.

“Our contention is that Lennar purposefully turned the [asbestos] monitors off,” Muhammad told the [San Francisco Bay Guardian back in 2007](#). “The problem was that Lennar was looking at their bottom line and violated every agreement. They threw the precautionary principle to the wind, literally. And the city looked the other way.”

Longtime Hunters Point resident Marie Harrison works for the environmental justice group [Greenaction](#). She said Lennar has been “nothing but shameful.”

“These guys, in my view, were so far out in left field when it came to doing the job that they were supposed to do, in protecting the community to the best of their ability, it was like community folks didn’t count,” Harrison said.

“They’ve been allowed to act with impunity,” she added.

Asked about health issues in the Shipyard, Bonner was canny in his response.

“Neither you or I are scientists or doctors, and I’m aware, and it’s been well documented, that Hunters Point has a higher degree of certain diseases. I do believe that there could be any number of reasons and several people have opined on what the reasons are,” he said. “The short answer is, yes, I’m certainly aware of it. I can only say that cleaning up the base, and bringing in healthy homes and healthy activities ultimately is in the best interest of the overall community.”

Beyond healthy homes, Lennar’s guiding interest is, of course, making profits, and when the Shipyard and Treasure Island projects are completed, the returns will be a sizable chunk of the \$8.5 billion redevelopment contracts. The company declined to disclose its profit expectations.

However the more than \$150,000 per year (according to self-reported estimates) that Lennar spent on lobbying efforts appears to have paid off. At the Shipyard, the company was chosen as the sole developer in spite of the advice of a financial consultant hired by the city to evaluate competing bids, and who recommended another firm. Under its negotiated agreement, Lennar is paying nothing for the land in the Shipyard and Treasure Island, but will share the cost of infrastructure with the city, and has agreed to profit-share with taxpayers — maybe. Under the agreement, the city can only share in the profits once Lennar has itself earned a 25 percent return on its investment.

The Navy is responsible for paying for the cleanup, which has been underway for decades. Harrison said it wasn’t too long ago that potentially contaminated sewage used to pop up out of manholes on Third Street in Hunters Point. Currently, one method of waste removal used by the Navy is to push potentially contaminated dirt near the shipyard 100 yards out into the bay.

“I’m not an oceanologist, I’m not an engineer,” Harrison said, “but even I can tell you that once that water flows out there to that 100-yard mark, it doesn’t get out there and say, ‘Oh, I can’t mix with the rest of this water because I’m contaminated.’ We already have an issue with mercury and PCBs in our water now.” The State’s Water Quality Control Board has been aware of this latter problem for years; potential carcinogens mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls are so prevalent in Bay fish, for example, the Board issued warnings against eating locally caught sea life.

Harrison's voice turned bleaker as she listed recent deaths in the neighborhood.

“On my block alone in the past two years, eight people have died from different types of cancer. There is a block over from me, going toward the Shipyard, a fourplex apartment building — three of the adult women, not in the same family, have breast cancer. In the unit behind there, the guy there has breast cancer. On Quesada [Avenue], two of the houses down from where the fourplex is, both women in that duplex have breast cancer. But for some reason, that's not seen as a cancer cluster.”

Last year, a contract worker who discovered high amounts of radioactive contamination on Treasure Island was subsequently fired, then blew the whistle by reporting the contamination to public officials. The contractor, radiation specialist Robert McLean, told the Center for Investigative Reporting at the time, “We found radiation, contaminated materials, in playgrounds and in areas that had previously been playgrounds.” A Navy contractor later admitted to [submitting false reports](#) for areas on Treasure Island that were still affected by radiation.



An aerial rendering of the San Francisco Shipyard, a new development by Lennar Urban, a subsidiary of Lennar Corporation. Lennar Urban

A report released in 2014 by the California Cancer Prevention Center was inconclusive about heightened risks for cancer on Treasure Island, noting that the fluctuating size of the island's population — 2,500 as of the 2010 census — “makes any sort of meaningful site-specific statistical analysis infeasible.”

“We may not speak the King's English,” Harrison said, “but we know what's happening to us. We see it and live it everyday, so if you want to know about it, ask us, don't ask somebody else because they don't live here.”

Bob Beck is director of the Treasure Island Development Authority, the city agency overseeing the area's development. He doesn't live on the island, nor do any of his seven staff. But with his engineering background, he sees Treasure Island as “an incredible location, from an engineering perspective—it's a very interesting project to be working on.”

“The city has a pretty high affordable housing requirement on the whole,” according to Beck, “but it's been an emphasis here, with an added emphasis on the formerly homeless.”

Beck is eager to start construction on the up to 8,000 new homes planned to be built over the next two decades. (Currently, the island has just under a thousand units.)

“We're very interested in getting into construction and start helping to contribute to the solution [for the housing crisis],” he said.

Beck's signature was on the November 2013 letter that went out to 24 households on Treasure Island who were forced to relocate due to chemical pollution beneath their homes. In spite of the relocations and a [news investigation](#) that found the Navy wanted to suppress radiation concerns, overall Beck said he believes "the Navy's been doing a good job" with the cleanup.

Harrison, however, worries what could happen as sea levels rise due to climate change. Contaminated dirt in the Bay might move closer to where people live, work, and go to school, she contended.

"There are so many holes in the city's [current] climate plan," she said. "We're not engineers, and we're not scientists, but if we can point out so many holes in the plan, there's a problem."

When asked about the cleanup, the Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) deferred to the Environmental Protection Agency. The EPA said its oversight and review process is sufficient.

"The Navy's own internal routine quality-control system functions as it is designed to do," a public affairs officer for EPA Region 9 responded in an email. "When the Navy has found any concerns, it has reported them and corrected them."

The cleanup is far from finished. The EPA rep said current health hazards can result from inhalation, drinking water and skin contact. The agency expects Hunters Point to be taken off the EPA Superfund site registry by 2021. By its own estimate, the Navy will finally finish its Treasure Island cleanup in 2022. In the meantime, they are excavating contaminated soil, storm drains, and other structures and moving them offsite.

"They also protect the public from contaminated water through banning use of groundwater for drinking or bathing and through treatments such as injecting iron or lactate to promote chemical breakdown of contaminants," the spokeswoman said.

According to the DTSC, there is also the costly process of moving especially contaminated dirt to land owned by private subcontractors, U.S. Ecology and Energy Solutions, located hundreds of miles away in Idaho and Utah. This is radioactive soil so dangerous that there are no dump sites in California that will touch the stuff, according to the DTSC's communications officer Sanford Nax.

For the formerly homeless moving onto Treasure Island, it's difficult to say whether the trade-off of a roof over one's head for a condition like asthma, or worse, is worth it.

But health concerns haven't stopped the first 88 homes at the Shipyard from being snapped up by market-rate homebuyers for between \$400,000 and \$700,000 apiece. Residents began moving in in April.

Meanwhile, Lennar recently solidified plans for more base redevelopments across the Bay, at the recently decommissioned Alameda Naval Air Station and Concord Naval Weapons Station.

Regarding all the mishaps and blame-passing tied to the Hunters Point and Shipyard projects, Harrison can't help but wonder whether things would be different if the people living on and near these former bases were wealthier. She pointed to the Victorian-style homes in the affluent Marina District that were damaged in an earthquake in 1989. In much of the neighborhood, signs of the quake had vanished within just a year.

"Do you really think if that happened on Evans Street [in Hunters Point] it would really get rebuilt that fast?" she asked. "I would like to say that we get fair treatment from the city, but I would be lying."