

Treasure Island: “Magic Isle” or Toxic & Radioactive Island?

Frequently Asked Questions

When did Treasure Island become a U.S. Navy base? What activities took place there?

Located in San Francisco Bay, Treasure Island was created in 1936 and was developed for the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition. In 1941, the City of San Francisco leased TI to the Navy for the duration of World War II and then turned it over to the Navy. Activities conducted at Naval Station Treasure Island included military firing areas, weapons storage, ship and aircraft storage and refueling, illegal dumping, open burning of “debris,” and repairing ships with deck markers painted with radium.

After WWII, the Navy established a training center for radiological decontamination, where the mock ship USS Pandemonium helped Navy students prepare for radiological warfare. The land-based vessel contained cesium-137, a radioactive isotope. Students practiced decontamination by scrubbing the ship. Over the next 30 years, the Navy dumped radioactive material and other contaminants in large rubbish pits. Starting in the 1960s, Navy families lived on the base, which closed in September 1997.

What type of development is planned for Treasure Island?

San Francisco plans up to 8,000 new residences, hotels, shops and offices on Treasure Island.

What types of contamination were found at Treasure Island?

According to the California Environmental Protection Agency/Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC), contaminants of concern found at Treasure Island include radioactive wastes, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), dioxins, lead, PAHs (polyaromatic hydrocarbons, arsenic, pesticides, paints, waste oil and fuel, solvents, asbestos, acids, and heavy metals.

Is there still toxic and radioactive contamination at Treasure Island?

Yes, contamination remains and “cleanup” is ongoing.

Hasn't the Navy conducted a good cleanup of contamination? Can the cleanup be trusted?

The answer is NO. In addition to the fact that significant contamination remains, including next to homes, there is concern about the adequacy of cleanup activities. One of the main companies involved in “cleaning up” contamination at Treasure Island was Tetra Tech – the same company that has been found to have committed massive fraud in the botched cleanup of the Hunters Point Shipyard Superfund Site in Bayview Hunters Point. Whistleblowers who worked at Treasure Island have come forward with alarming reports of similar fraud at Treasure Island – yet the government has refused to investigate.

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Who lives on Treasure Island?

After the Navy base closed, it was turned over to the City of San Francisco. City legislation required the city to use Treasure Island to help house low income people. It has continued to provide subsidized housing - according to the census, 1,561 residents of the total 3,129 live below the poverty line.

Where do people live on Treasure Island?

Many low income, people of color residents live in subsidized housing literally feet from radioactive and toxic waste sites. Most residents live on Site 12, which was previously used by the Navy for an ammunition bunker and storage area, and contains contaminants included polychlorinated biphenyls, polyaromatic hydrocarbons, dioxins, arsenic, lead, and radium 226.

Is it safe to live on Treasure Island?

Many of the toxic and radioactive contaminants have the ability to cause serious health problems such as asthma and cancer. Many residents and former residents have complained of serious health problems.

How will Treasure Island be affected by sea level rise due to climate change?

Treasure Island is at risk from sea level rise and flooding that threatens to inundate contamination sites and further pollute the Bay and neighborhoods. TI is vulnerable to land erosion, which causes sinking.

Are there Land use restrictions - why you can't dig?

Residents are advised not to dig, garden, or drag soil inside their homes. Soil samples taken by the Navy contained elevated levels of lead, DDT, dioxins, PCBs, PAHs, motor oil pollutants, arsenic, and vanadium. These contaminants are located in resident's backyards, the elementary schoolyard, and the daycare. Due to the presence of these contaminants, digging is prohibited.

Information Resources:

Most of the information in this FAQ is from the California Department of Toxic Substances Control website: https://www.envirostor.dtsc.ca.gov/public/profile_report?global_id=38370044

Reuters investigation: "A California Naval base shutters, and contamination lingers decades later" <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-military-legacy/>

Articles written by investigative reporter Carol Harvey in the Bay View Newspaper including <http://sfbayview.com/2018/10/media-silent-as-navy-digs-1280-radiological-objects-from-treasure-island/>

For more information, visit Greenaction's website: <http://greenaction.org/treasure-island/>

This FAQ produced by Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice

www.greenaction.org (415) 447-3904 greenaction@greenaction.org