

2,000 Treasure Islanders live with toxic waste

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sued to stop the project, pending a more thorough examination of the development plans.

Not long after the fair wrapped in September 1940, WWII broke out, and plans to build an airport on the site were scuttled. Instead, the Navy took the island over, trading for it land 20 miles south that subsequently became San Francisco International Airport. Prior to abandoning Treasure Island in the mid-1990s, the Navy used it for, among other things, chemical and nuclear warfare training.

There was no gold, but at least silver was buried out there, according to an environmental impact report on proposed development on the landfill. The silver came from a former Navy medical clinic that included X-ray and photo processing equipment. But in its 50-plus years of occupancy, the Navy also spread PCBs, dioxins, lead, asbestos, a passel of petroleum products, solvents of all sorts, metals of many kinds, arsenic and other poisons such as DDT, plutonium and radium 226.

Along the way, radioactive spills were, when acknowledged, cleaned up according to the standards of the day. However, documentation was haphazard and there was

Home at right on the northwest corner of the island is occupied. House at left is empty and fenced off, scheduled for demolition because of toxic contamination.



Contaminated soil on Avenue M is covered in black plastic to keep it from becoming airborne pending its removal.

more ignorance than awareness of the toxic risks. Recently discovered among the rubble, for instance, were lapel pins — souvenirs from the world fair — that contained radium, which in that more innocent era was thought to be a harmless way to make things glow. Now we know: The results are sometimes horrifying.

Under the terms of the Department of Defense's 1981 Installation Restoration Act, military properties were to be inspected for hazardous substances and, where found, risks to human health and the environment were to be cost-effectively reduced. In its assessments, the Navy identified 33 problem areas on the combined Treasure Island and Yerba Buena site and began work.

Arc Ecology, which is party to the Citizens for a Sustainable Treasure Island's lawsuit, has been involved with Treasure Island planning since the Navy decided to leave the base, and has monitored the cleanup at former military properties at Hunters Point, Alameda and the Presidio, as well as other projects worldwide.

"They're still working to do PCB remediation," says Arc Ecology CEO Saul Bloom, "but it's exponentially harder and more expensive to get through that last 10% of pollutants." The issue, he said, is the risk associated with prolonged exposure to even a small level of toxic material. "There's no such thing as complete cleanup," Bloom said. "The work typically is as good as the funding allows it to be."

For much of the island, the plan, basically, is to remove as much toxic material as possible and pave over the rest. "How do we protect the public from the excess cancer that we expect from the exposure?" Bloom asked, while allowing that "as compared to Hunters Point, Treasure Island is lightly contaminated but it still needs to be remediated. The problem is that because it's a shoal, it's harder to

clean up."

This work will be complicated by the fact that Treasure Island is so close to the San Andreas Fault and the perhaps even-more-ready-to-rock Hayward Fault.

The Navy determined in 1993 that it would close its Treasure Island facility in 1997. But before the military can transfer any of its property to civilian use, it has to complete the work mandated in the Installation Restoration Act. To date, the Navy has been able to transfer two large segments of Treasure Island to the city's Treasure Island Development Agency, an LLC that is a conduit between the city and developers

The Navy's cleanup work on 24 of the 33 problem sites has been supervised by California's Department of Toxic Substances Control, and, in the nine other cases, where the issue is petroleum contaminants, the San Francisco Regional Water Quality Control Board.

DTSC project manager Remedios Sunga and supervisor Denise Tsugi report that the Navy has satisfactorily cleaned up half of the 24 sites they are monitoring. It is possible, they said, that it will not be feasible to do some of the remaining cleanup work to the standard of "unrestricted land use," allowing everything from housing to day-care centers, that the Navy has met so far, and that "land-use covenants" — restrictions on future uses — will be required for some sites.

Some of the 2,000 people living on the island are already familiar with the concept of restricted uses. For instance, the TIDA prohibits its tenants from "gardening, digging or disturbing soil" in their own backyards.

Of the nine petroleum-contaminated sites, the Water Quality Control Board has deemed the Navy's cleanup work complete on eight. Work continues on the former seaplane maintenance area on the south side of Treasure Island, on Clipper Cove. Along the way, 50,000 tons of petroleum-contaminated soils have been excavated and removed. Work on the new span of the Bay Bridge

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