

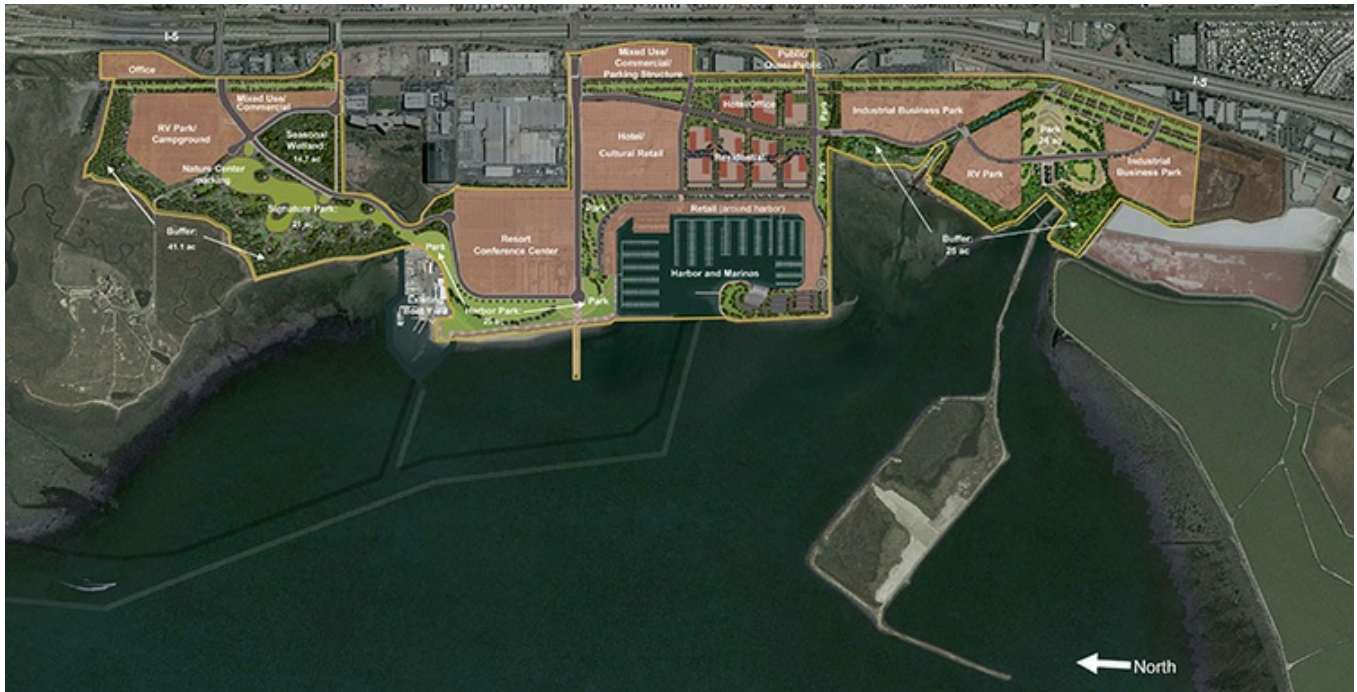
Balanced master plan

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Community outreach transforms San Diego Bay's waterfront.

Jon Schmid



The Chula Vista Bayfront Master Plan includes a mix of 1,500 town homes and condominiums, hotels, a resort conference center, a 236-vehicle RV park, open space and parks, and natural habitat restoration or preservation.

Nestled within the City of Chula Vista's waterfront, about 12 miles south of the City of San Diego on San Diego Bay, lies more than 550 quiet acres of underutilized industrial property and environmentally sensitive habitat. Owned and under the jurisdiction of the city, the Port of San Diego, and a developer, Pacifica Companies, the area is one of the last significant waterfront development areas in Southern California.

Dubbed the Chula Vista Bayfront Master Plan (CVBMP), the proposal to develop the site gained final approval in the summer of 2013. When completed, the site will include hotels, a resort conference center, a mix of 1,500 town homes and condominiums, a 236-vehicle RV park, open space and parks, and natural habitat restoration or preservation. When fully implemented, the plan will create thousands of badly needed jobs, establish new public parks, protect natural coastal resources, and provide amenities to attract visitors.

Outreach pointers

The strategic outreach plan for CVBMP had many moving parts and had to be flexible enough to adapt to a rapidly changing environment as well as respond to the public's questions. Following are some of the keys

to the plan's success:

- Provided accurate, factual information in a straightforward manner without spin or hype.
- Involved trusted community leaders and let them help carry the message.
- Had project managers from the three partners present to community groups. They know all of the details of the project, are most able to answer questions or clarify issues, and are less apt to spin their answers.
- Listened carefully to the public. Their input and local knowledge can help create a better project. Including the public in the process also builds trust and support.
- Found a way to make everyone somewhat happy. No single stakeholder or special interest got all that they wanted, but enough to gain their support for the project.
- Documented support through letters and signatures.
- Responded to California Coastal Commission staff and collaborated on resolving issues.

Attaining regulatory agency approval required more than a decade of planning and public outreach to transform the site into a world-class waterfront resort destination that also serves the needs of the surrounding community. It also meant many months of collaboration with California Coastal Commission staff to work through the necessary details. For developers and public agencies pursuing large-scale development projects, the CVBMP is instructive as an example of both successful public engagement for the long term and how a finely tuned outreach team can react quickly and decisively to blunt unwarranted opposition springing up at the last minute.

Given California's rigorous approval process, and the long and somewhat tangled history of this particular parcel of property, this effort required exhaustive community engagement. Importantly, the effort sought input from those who would be affected by the project and ensured that the public's contribution would be reflected in the final outcome. This approach was rewarded by broad support and trust in the process as well as in the team implementing the plan. The outreach team organized more than 100 community meetings, a standing citizen's advisory committee, and countless presentations, workshops, and other engagement tactics.



A planned Bayfront Resort and conference center is expected to include as many as 1,600 rooms and 415,000 square feet of meeting space.

Undeniably, input from the public participation meetings helped to create a better project. Previous planning efforts for the property met such high levels of opposition, over several decades, that they were unceremoniously scrapped — and a lot of planning baggage remained.

The current plan, a joint master-planning effort by the three partners, truly has something for everyone with a balance struck between public benefit and economic sustainability, commercial and recreational uses, as well as urban development and resource preservation.

Opposition rears its head

Although widely regarded as a model for incorporating public input and balancing the wide range of interests at the table — environmental groups, labor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, residents, the city, and the port — the CVBMP wasn't immune to every developer's nightmare: An 11th hour, well-organized opposition effort threatened to derail the entire project just weeks before it was scheduled to go before the Coastal Commission.

The CVBMP represents the last significant waterfront development opportunity in Southern California.

A very small but technologically savvy and vocal opposition group with strong community ties emerged and began a campaign against the plan. As is often the case, misinformation sowed the seeds of opposition. Outdated renderings, illustrations, and data from failed attempts at a plan confused the issues and created doubt. The organization spread its message through an independent website and within a few weeks the campaign seemed to be gaining traction.



The solid foundation of trust with the community that had been built through the years of outreach served the development team well as it faced this new and critical challenge.

The City of Chula Vista, the Port of San Diego, and Pacifica Companies, with the participation of local stakeholders, convened a team to reach out to the community with accurate, factual information. Cook + Schmid developed a strategic plan to push the facts to the forefront. As part of the educational outreach, the team reminded everyone how their previous input was incorporated into the current plan. As is the case with all Cook + Schmid programs, the community engagement efforts held true to principles set forth by the International Association for Public Participation (www.iap2.org).

The outreach plan combined mass media and new media tactics with extremely targeted engagement with regional influencers. Most of all, it relied on the relationships and goodwill that had been fostered through during the last several years.

A project-specific website, launched in less than two weeks, functioned as an easy-to-navigate portal to current and relevant project information, and was updated regularly.

Following this plan, the team successfully achieved the broad outpouring of support it needed to carry the CVBMP forward, including a somewhat rare and powerful

collaboration between developers and environmentalists.

To elevate awareness and to distinguish its efforts from the opposition, Cook + Schmid created a new brand and sharpened the focus of the positioning and key messages for the project. The highly recognizable “I ♥ CV Bayfront,” in eco-friendly green, was reflected in all supporting materials and provided an easy symbol for allies to use and rally around. The program’s brand, and its associated key messages, was reflected in press releases, fact sheets, speaking points, and even in the form of buttons and T-shirts worn by supporters at public meetings.



The effort included designing a project-specific website and social media platforms, all launched in less than two weeks. The website functioned as an easy-to-navigate portal to current and relevant project information, and was updated regularly. These online channels provided detailed updates to community leaders and groups, largely to answer questions and clarify discrepancies in the information the public was receiving. The tactical components were designed to leverage each other for maximum impact.

The Cook + Schmid media relations team, including a number of award-winning former journalists, drove coverage of the CVBMP through multiple broadcast, print, and online news channels. Coverage leading up to the Coastal Commission hearing helped maintain momentum for the project and built broad positive buzz in the community, overshadowing the opposition’s messages. A series of opinion pieces were also placed with strategic local and regional news media.

A highly recognizable logo was reflected in all supporting materials and provided an easy symbol for allies to use and rally around.



The community outreach and engagement was highly successful in reassuring the public, and resulted in more than 600 letters of support and 2,000 signatures of support for the CVBMP. All of this was presented to coastal commissioners prior to the hearing, with more than 100 supporters, clad in the “I ♥ CV Bayfront” regalia, turning up at Coastal Commission meetings prior to the vote.

The community outreach program built tremendous excitement for the project among residents and re-energized community leaders who recognized the danger of standing on the sidelines during the critical home stretch before the final vote. Backing was so strong that many of the diverse stakeholders made the trip from San Diego to the California Coastal Commission meeting in Santa Cruz to voice their support for the plan. The plan won unanimous approval from the California Coastal Commission with the consideration of the CVBMP and vote completed in less than an hour.

While the CVBMP is still waiting to break ground, the project has been honored with awards by the North American Strategic Infrastructure Leadership Forum for its project impact on job creation and business growth and by the American Planning Association for Urban Design for excellence in urban planning.

Additional information about the CVPMP is available at www.cvbayfront.com.

Jon Schmid is the president and CEO of Cook + Schmid, a marketing, public relations, and public outreach firm based in San Diego.