



*An important part of Tacoma's flyway would be impacted by proposed 147 acre warehouse complex in South Tacoma. The **South Tacoma Neighborhood Council** wants to create a Green Zone instead. (Photo credit to Dan Villa)*

Mega-Warehouse Proposal Challenged by Neighborhood Council

Rarely do developers choose to build on a federal Superfund Site, nor do they often take on the challenge of building directly over an aquifer important to the city's water supply. But in South Tacoma an out-of-state corporation, Bridge Industrial, submitted a permit to convert roughly 150 acres of former railroad land into a massive warehouse complex on some of the last remaining open green space in the area.

The application for this permit is in direct conflict with the South Tacoma Neighborhood Council's previous code amendment application to the city, for better protecting the environment and resident's health, as well as to promote eco-industry. That particular land used to be mostly marsh before the railroads largely filled it in, but it is still an important wetland with a critical groundwater aquifer below.

The plan to create a mega-warehouse complex on this undeveloped acreage, proposes for 2.5 million square feet of concrete surface coverage for warehouse facilities, plus additional drives and parking space for 1,436 vehicles. Approximately 75 percent of the currently open land would become impervious pavement.

No surprise that the proposal set off a firestorm of e-mails and meetings by the South Tacoma Neighborhood Council.



Prior to the permit application for this commercial development, the Neighborhood Council had applied through the city's Annual Code Amendment process to strengthen the outdated groundwater protection code -and- create an economic green zone, with the idea to better protect the aquifer and promote non-polluting eco-businesses. This would benefit both residents and urban wildlife by preserving trees, open green space and wetlands since the land is an important watershed to Flett Creek, Chambers-Clover Creek then into Chambers Bay/Puget Sound.

This land is also one of the Pacific migratory green flyways for birds to stop in open spaces along Flett Creek, situated between the Tacoma Nature Center and other ponds and wetlands on the way to Commencement Bay. This warehouse development would destroy all of that. *(Photo credit to Michelle Mood)*

It would seem that the permit process should have been paused until after the City Council had completed the South Tacoma Economic Green Zone proposal (STEGZ), but it took the Neighborhood Council objecting to the Planning Department's apparent intention to swiftly approve the permit. Residents have since asked for an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Health Impact Assessment (HIA), considering the potential harm to ecosystems, air, water and soil from so much impervious surfaces and additional vehicles, especially to an area already suffering from low tree canopy and high illness and mortality rates.

Within the first months of learning about the development, residents of South Tacoma reached out to Earth Justice to comment on the project. This environmental legal defense group outlined, in detail, the need for a cumulative impact statement, since they consider this project an environmental injustice.

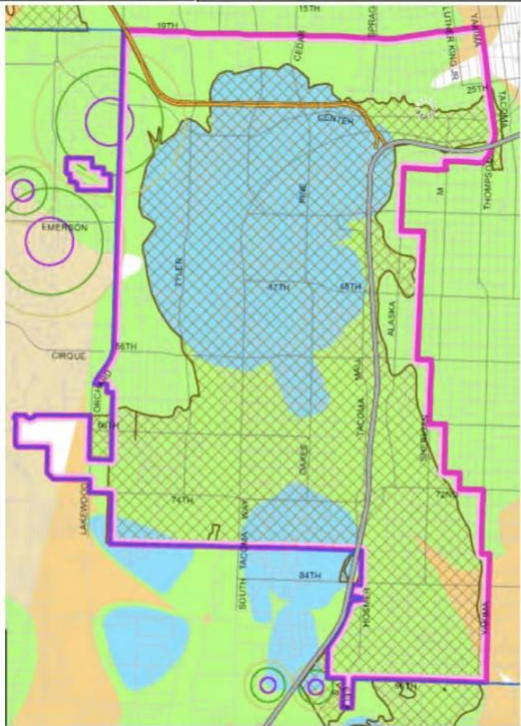
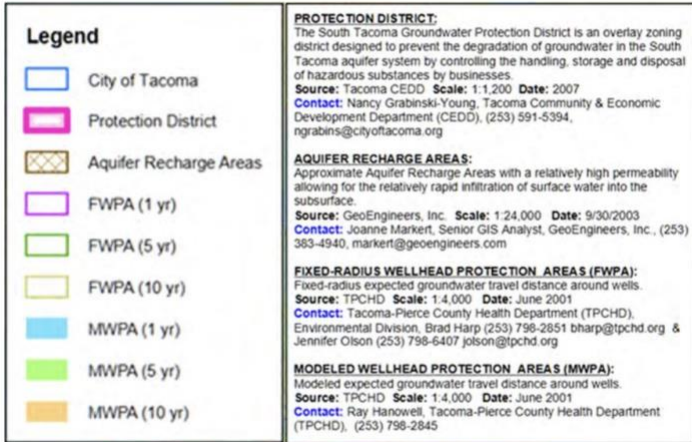
In Earth Justice's public comments, they pointed out that the developer estimated an increase of 5,000 daily vehicle trips per weekday, but Earth Justice estimates daily trips at twice the amount (closer to 12,000). The increase in emissions from diesel trucks has not yet been quantified, nor were the impacts on the residents' health in surrounding neighborhoods or to the city's climate change goals.

The regional air pollution agency has found that City of Tacoma already has one of the highest risks of cancer in the state, with diesel pollution a primary risk factor. Yet the developers have

not appropriately analyzed project impacts on air quality nor offered effective mitigation for the significant increase in traffic.

Earth Justice also pointed out that the site would have tremendous water runoff from the sprawling buildings and parking lots, moving water away from being able to infiltrate naturally down to the aquifer levels. Earth Justice noted that the permit applicant, again, did not adequately examine these impacts as required by the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA).

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https://cms.cityoftacoma.org/Planning/Shoreline/Maps/10_Aquifer.pdf



As of this time, even after multiple SEPA resubmittals, the permit applicant still hasn't addressed the consequences of impacting the recharge of the South Tacoma Aquifer, which currently can supply up to 40 percent of Tacoma's back-up water supply and is projected to be relied upon even more in the coming years due to climate change.

Earth Justice concluded that the project will disproportionately impact a community which has historically already been overburdened, which would increase the environmental injustice to South Tacoma. Earth Justice recommended that the city suspend all permitting until this project is given closer scrutiny with a full EIS.

The South Tacoma Neighborhood Council has also reached out to many of Tacoma's environmental groups which sent letters raising numerous issues important to each. Collectively, the groups oppose the Planning Director's expectation to issue a Mitigated

Determination of Non-significance, when no concessions could possibly mitigate the severe consequences to the residents and the environment.

However, the city is continuing with the permitting process, and it's still unknown if they will require an EIS and/or HIA. Even if an EIS is required, the Neighborhood Council plans to monitor it closely considering so much of the SEPA submission was inaccurate and incomplete. Meantime, the Neighborhood Council's code amendment has been continually delayed and (although submitted in spring of 2021) has been stretched out by the city into 2025.

Having input from organizations like Earth Justice, other independent experts and local environmental groups has helped to delay the permit approval. Equally important is the Neighborhood Council's effective community organizer, coordinating efforts.

This is not the first time the South Tacoma Neighborhood Council has stood up to large corporations, but the city seems far too accepting of an out-of-state corporation instead of supporting its own residents, the environmentally critical area and the very future of the city's water supply.

Article by Kirk Kirkland

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