

# San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission

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**TO:** Design Review Board Members

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**SUBJECT: Near- and Long-Term Projects at Fisherman’s Wharf; Briefing**

## Project Summary

### Project Proponent

Port of San Francisco (the Port)

### Project Area (Exhibit 1)

Fisherman’s Wharf is located at the Port of San Francisco and is bounded by Pier 39 and the Hyde Street Pier along the northernmost reach of the Port of San Francisco's 7.5-mile-long waterfront.

### Review by the Board

This briefing is to inform the Design Review Board (Board) of several near- and long-term projects at various stages of design and construction at Fisherman's Wharf. Staff request that the Board limit its review to clarifying questions. Community outreach and engagement for a long-term project is underway and is tentatively scheduled to come to the Board for a joint review with the Port’s Waterfront Design Advisory Committee (WDAC) at a later date in 2026.

## Project Site

### Site History (Exhibit 2)

In 1872, the fishing industry was recognized as a major resource of the state, and land was set aside at the present Fisherman’s Wharf area for commercial fishing use by the Board of State Harbor Commissioners. During the 1900s, fishermen sold part of their catch to the public directly from the boats, and by 1920, a series of one-story wood buildings were constructed for fish markets. The fish market stalls were numbered one through nine and a fisherman named Tom Castagnola expanded his stall to include seafood cocktails.

In 1935, fisherman Michael Gerald established the first full-service restaurant on the Wharf. Several other families, the Aliotos, the Sabellas, and the DiMaggios, soon followed suit and opened their own restaurants. During the 1960s, the success of the conversion of Ghirardelli Chocolate Factory and the Cannery row into multiuse public oriented spaces stimulated additional tourist-oriented development at Fisherman’s Wharf.

From approximately 1970 onward, Fisherman’s Wharf shifted from a mostly working waterfront into a hybrid fishing port and major tourist district. Pier 39 opened in October 1978, adding



shops, restaurants, bay cruises, and a much more entertainment-focused waterfront economy, while commercial fishing remained active around Pier 45 and nearby berths. Sea lions also began hauling out at Pier 39, turning wildlife itself into a major attraction.

Through the 1990s and 2000s, Fisherman's Wharf settled into the role most people know today: a heavily visited waterfront district built around restaurants, Alcatraz and bay-tour departures, street life, and maritime nostalgia. The Wharf also remained the city's core fishing harbor, especially around Pier 45, where the commercial fleet and fish-processing activity continued as important working-waterfront use.

### **Current Site Conditions (Exhibit 4, 5)**

The Fisherman's Wharf area known today gradually evolved from a primarily commercial fishing area into an eclectic mix of fishing-industry-related uses and a tourist entertainment district. The area is accessible by many modes of transportation including the Muni historic streetcar (F-line); cable car; bus route; tour bus; bicycle; water taxi and ferry services; cars; and walking. Taylor Street and Jefferson Street are key paths of travel for multiple modes, including goods movement. There are many public parking lots in the vicinity outside of Port jurisdiction. Parking on Port property is primarily permit-parking only.

Fisherman's Wharf continues to be one of the most populated regions of Port property, hosting large numbers of people at the overwater attractions and restaurants. On the landside, investments by many family-owned, long-term restaurant and commercial tenants at the Port create the culture and heart of the Wharf, and the area continues to be one of the most popular destinations in the city.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic created a major disruption for the area, forcing restaurant closures under public health orders and creating a challenged operational environment for a long period of time after that. Reductions in tourism also impacted the businesses in the area. The Port instituted "shared prosperity" rent deferral and forgiveness programs intended to assist businesses in reopening their doors but a number of them were unable to do so.

However, the area continues to serve as the hub for San Francisco's fishing industry, which includes fishing boats berthed at Fisherman's Wharf's inner and outer lagoons, Hyde Street Fishing Harbor, and fish processors based at Pier 45. Most of this pier is dedicated to fishing industry operations and fish handling businesses that receive, prepare, and distribute seafood throughout San Francisco, the Bay Area, and beyond. Together, these facilities make San Francisco the largest fishing industry center along the California coast.

The former Alioto's space borders on the Fisherman's Wharf Inner Lagoon, which is the oldest section of the Fisherman's Wharf fishing harbor and is an important operating center for the fishing and excursion fleet. The Inner Lagoon hosts fishers, excursion operators, and classic Monterey fishing vessels. The current "end tie" configuration of the berths does not meet modern-day requirements and needs for maritime operations and requires investment.

## Land Use and Planning Context

### San Francisco Waterfront Special Area Plan

<https://www.bcdc.ca.gov/resources/plans/#special-area-plans>

The McAteer-Petris Act allows for the San Francisco Bay Plan (Bay Plan) to contain or incorporate by reference Special Area Plans with more specific findings and policies for portions of the Bay and its shoreline. Special Area Plans are developed in partnership with local governments, and when adopted by the Commission, are incorporated by reference into the Bay Plan. The [San Francisco Waterfront Special Area Plan](#) (SFWSAP), first established in 1975, is one such plan. It breaks down Port of San Francisco jurisdiction into three geographic vicinities, Fisherman's Wharf, the Northeastern Waterfront, and the Southern Waterfront, and provides an overview of potential uses for redevelopment.

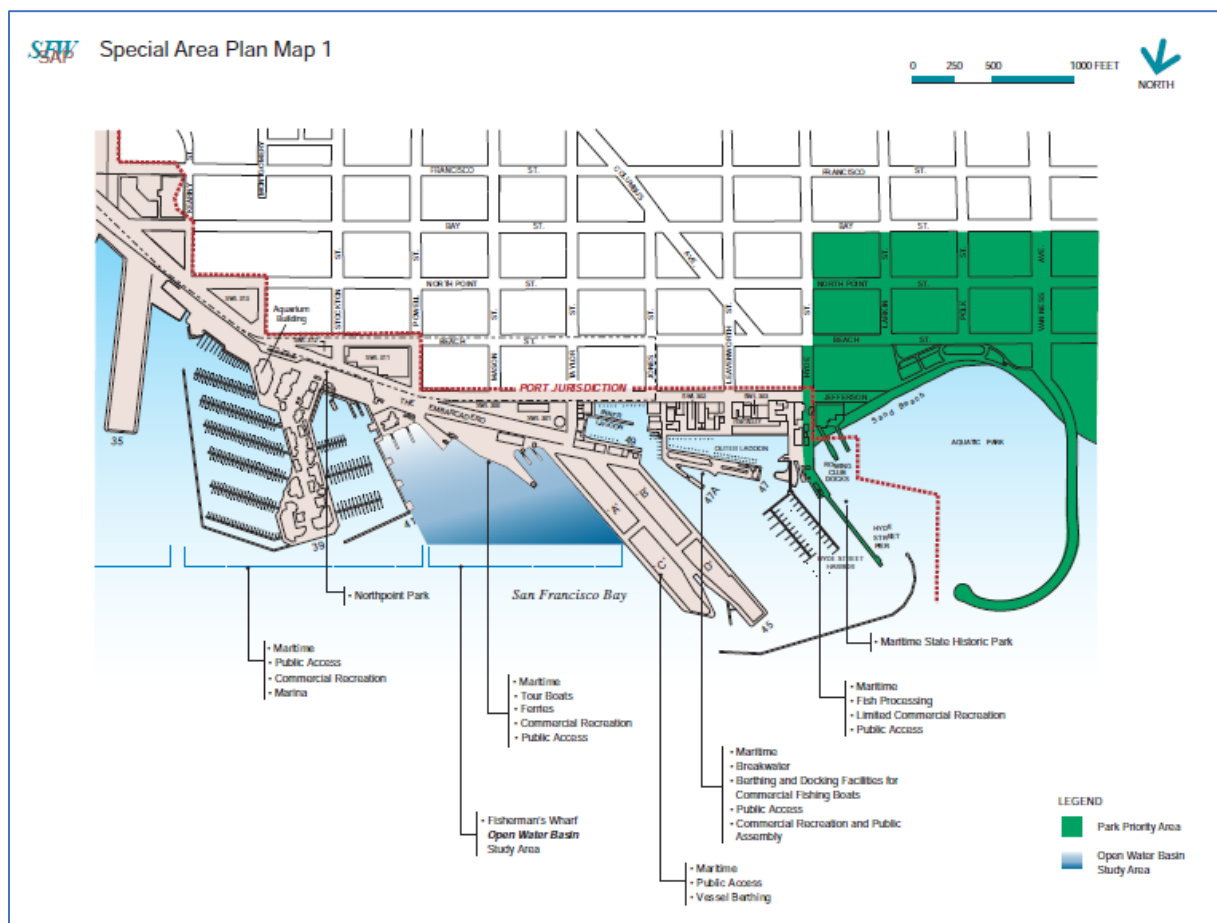


Figure 1: San Francisco Waterfront Special Area Plan. Fisherman's Wharf Geographic Vicinity.

### History of the SFWSAP

The Port of San Francisco is constructed on Public Trust lands that were conveyed from the State of California to the City and County of San Francisco in 1968. When this transfer of ownership was made, the Port inherited significant debt from the State as well as obligations to invest in maritime activities. These constraints, along with significant need for investment in the deteriorated waterfront, created immediate financial difficulty for the Port, which is almost completely funded by incoming revenue.

After the failure of several development proposals at the Port in the early 1970s, BCDC recognized that the Port was in a difficult financial position and that some development would be needed to remove, reconstruct, and repair deteriorated historic piers and invest in public access and maritime uses along the San Francisco waterfront.

In 1971, BCDC amended the Bay Plan to create new policies intended to facilitate development at the Port of San Francisco's property in recognition of financial and physical constraints facing the Port. These new policies allowed fill for repair, reconstruction, and reuse of piers for Bay-oriented commercial recreation (uses restaurants or hotels) provided that projects satisfy a number of specific requirements. Policy 1(a) in this section of the Bay Plan is colloquially referred to as the "50% Rule." The 50% Rule contains two basic requirements for projects that propose to reconstruct and reuse piers for commercial recreation: 1) piers must be smaller in size than those being removed, and 2) 50% of the reconstructed pier must be dedicated to open space or public access. In this context, the open space requirement may include removing the pier to create an open water basin. These policies remain in the Bay Plan today.

To further effectuate these policies, BCDC and the Port adopted the first SFWSAP in 1975. The SFWSAP sets forth policies for projects within BCDC's jurisdiction from Hyde Street Pier in Fisherman's Wharf to India Basin in Bayview-Hunters Point. The SFWSAP contains geographic-specific policies that specify permitted uses which may be allowed on fill in certain areas within BCDC's jurisdiction and guide the provision of public access.

However, the original SFWSAP did not result in the revitalization of the waterfront that was intended. Repair, reconstruction, and seismic strengthening of piers was – and remains – costly. Since the policy was adopted, the only project that could satisfy the 50% Rule while providing sufficient capital to repair and reconstruct a pier was the Pier 39 project in 1978. Numerous other constraints, including limited demand for exclusively water-oriented uses, impaired the ability of the Port to revitalize the waterfront.

In 2000, BCDC and the Port undertook a major update to the SFWSAP to align BCDC's policies with Port local planning efforts, including a 1997 Waterfront Land Use Plan that pushed for a wider diversity of uses and activities on the waterfront.

The major component of the 2000 update to the SFWSAP concerned the Northeastern Waterfront, from Pier 35 to China Basin. In this area of the waterfront, the SFWSAP was amended to respond to commercial realities of the Port by removing the 50% Rule and allowing the Port to redevelop certain piers for uses consistent with the Public Trust Doctrine and the Port's legislative trust grant without triggering BCDC's water-oriented use criterion and no alternative upland location criterion. The Public Trust Doctrine is a common law doctrine that protects the public's use of California's waterways for fishing, boating, water-based recreation, natural habitat protection, and other water-oriented activities. The Public Trust is not static but is continuously evolving to protect the public's use and needs in California's waterways.

#### *Fisherman's Wharf Policy Changes*

In 2025, BCDC and the Port undertook a similar update to the SFWSAP to align Fisherman's Wharf policies with the Northeastern Waterfront policies, which removed the 50% Rule from Fisherman's Wharf. As a result, non-water-oriented uses will now be allowed on piers within Fisherman's Wharf if they are consistent with Public Trust uses and the Port's legislative trust

grant. This will provide the Port with more flexibility as it seeks to revitalize the Fisherman's Wharf area and improve shoreline resilience and sea level rise adaptability.

Critically, other Bay Plan policies on the relevant topic still apply. The Bay Plan Commercial Fishing policies include policies that protect fishing as an important Bay industry. For example, Commercial Fishing Policy 3 states: "Existing commercial fishing mooring areas, berths, and onshore facilities should not be displaced or removed unless adequate new facilities are provided or BCDC determines that adequate facilities of the same or better quality are available." As a result, any redevelopment at Fisherman's Wharf must protect existing commercial fishing uses.

The removal of the 50% rule from Fisherman's Wharf will not result in a reduction in public access or placement of any unnecessary Bay fill. For example, the removal of the 50% rule from Fisherman's Wharf would eliminate the requirement that a replacement pier at Fisherman's Wharf devote 50% of its space to public access. In place of this strict formulation for public access, BCDC would continue to apply the requirements of the McAteer-Petris act to provide maximum feasible public access consistent with the project and apply all relevant Bay Plan Public Access policies. Additionally, without the 50% rule's fill-removal requirement, BCDC's otherwise-applicable laws and policies continue to apply – including that fill must be the minimum amount necessary and that mitigation may be required for project impacts to Bay resources. Furthermore, removing the 50% rule would improve the Port's ability to undertake seismic or structural repairs for commercial recreation on piers. In past instances, BCDC has considered significant structural work beyond routine repairs and maintenance for existing pile-supported piers that predate BCDC to constitute Bay fill and are thus subject to the 50% rule. However, this significantly impedes pre-existing businesses' ability to repair and maintain the piers on which they operate. Similar significant structural repair and maintenance projects will become more important as the Port undertakes projects to increase sea level rise resilience.

## **Port of San Francisco Waterfront Plan**

<https://www.sfport.com/projects-programs/waterfront-plan>

Adopted in January 2024, the [Port of San Francisco Waterfront Plan](#) (Waterfront Plan) governs the use, design, and improvement of public trust lands, which include historic piers, shoreline, and upland properties.

Fisherman's Wharf is the northernmost subarea identified in the Waterfront Plan and aligns with the SFWSAP. The Waterfront Plan identifies six objectives to guide redevelopment within the Fisherman's Wharf subarea:

1. Protect and maintain Fisherman's Wharf as a working fishing port;
2. Maintain a colorful mix of maritime and water-dependent activities at Fisherman's Wharf, in addition to fishing;
3. Enhance the public access experience and open space programming at Fisherman's Wharf;
4. Maintain the Wharf's diverse mix of public, commercial, maritime, and recreation uses, and include activities that attract local residents and dispel the Wharf's image as a tourist-only attraction;

5. Work closely with longstanding Fisherman's Wharf restaurants and businesses to coordinate investments in infrastructure improvements that maintain public safety and economic vitality and adapt to sea level rise;
6. Manage transportation flow to and through Fisherman's Wharf to maintain viable industrial and loading access for the fishing industry and commercial businesses, reduce single-occupant vehicle use, increase public transit service levels, provide continuing enhancements of the pedestrian and bicycle experience, and support efficient parking operations for waterfront visitors to the Wharf.

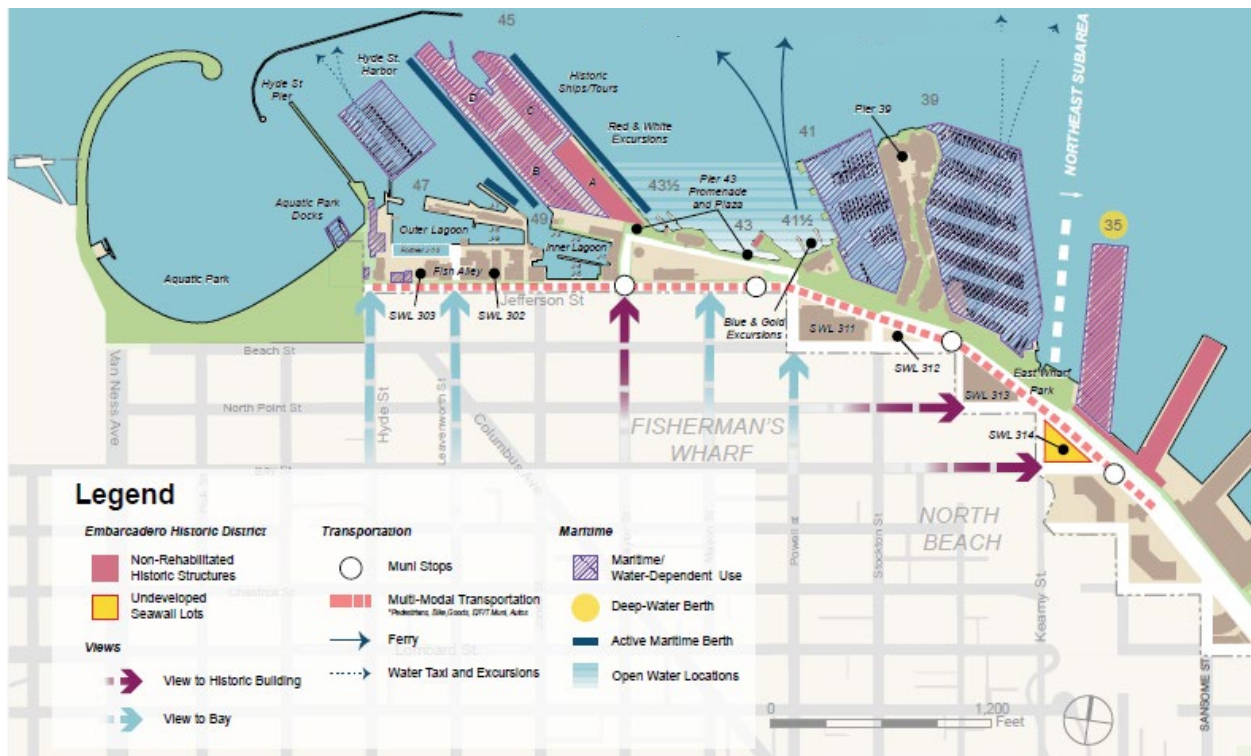


Figure 2 Port of San Francisco Waterfront Plan. Fisherman's Wharf Subarea.

## San Francisco Waterfront Flood Study

<https://www.sfport.com/wrp/draft-plan>

The San Francisco Waterfront Flood Study (Flood Study) is a multiyear effort led by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) in collaboration with the City and Port of San Francisco. Beginning in 2018 and still on-going, the Flood Study analyzes the coastal flood risk and effects of sea level rise for the 7.5 miles of waterfront within the Port of San Francisco's jurisdiction, from Aquatic Park to Heron's Head Park. It is a complex case study of planning for sea level rise along an urban waterfront while maintaining an array of Public Trust uses. A 2024 Draft Plan of the Flood Study identifies actions to defend the shoreline against rising sea levels and presents an environmental analysis of those actions. The Flood Study serves as a microcosm of adaptation efforts throughout the whole Bay Area, as its adaptation strategies vary based on preexisting conditions, infrastructure, and geography, and necessarily span the green-gray spectrum.

The proposed adaptation options in the Flood Study are estimated to cost \$13.5 billion, and, if approved by Congress, the Federal government may pay up to 65% of the construction cost. Implementation of proposed adaptation strategies has not begun, as next steps in the process include seeking congressional funding, and detailed preconstruction and engineering designs. Construction and implementation are currently projected to begin around 2030.

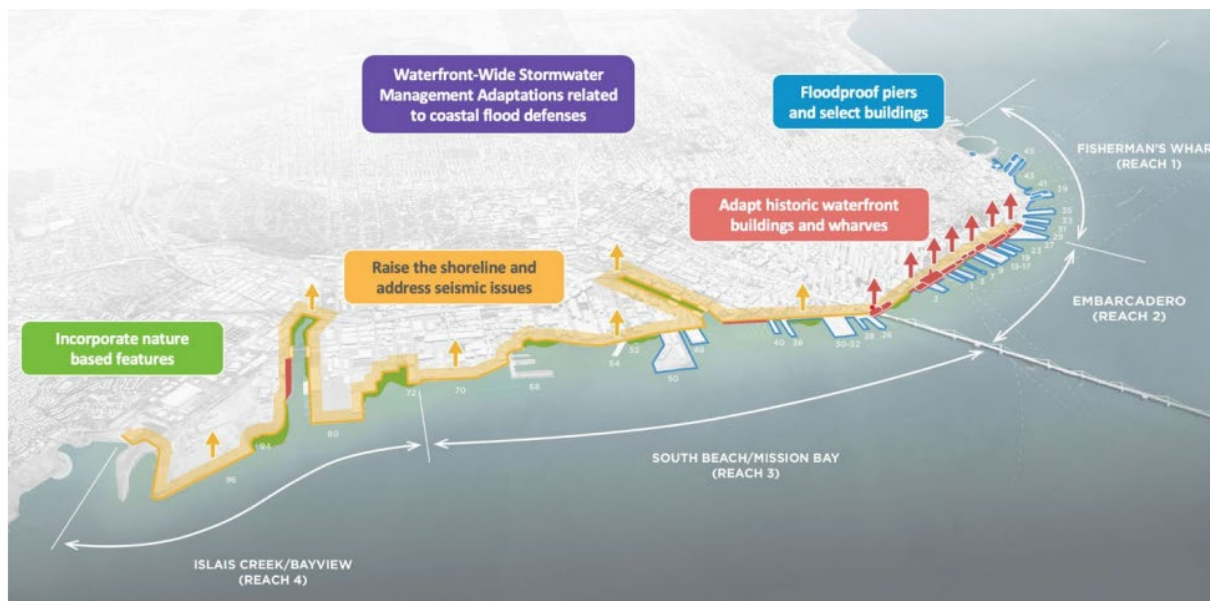


Figure 3: USACE Flood Study's Draft Integrated Feasibility Report.

### Waterfront Resilience Program Multi-Hazard Risk Assessment

Over the past decade, Port staff have been working to understand and address earthquake and flood risks along Port property. The Port's Waterfront Resilience Program completed a Multi-Hazard Risk Assessment (MHRA) in 2020, intended to help prioritize Port properties and infrastructure for resilience improvements. The MHRA noted that the older, timber-pile-supported structures in Fisherman's Wharf have a high earthquake risk compounded by unstable soils along the shoreline. These pile-supported structures, which includes structures along Taylor Street are home to small businesses and workers catering to visitors and residents. While these buildings are still safe to occupy on an ongoing basis from a building code perspective, the structures are vulnerable to strong ground shaking and the lateral spreading expected if a moderate to large earthquake were to take place.

## Near- and Long-Term Projects at Fisherman's Wharf

### Temporary Public Realm Activations (Exhibit 6)

BCDC has permitted several temporary projects to encourage public realm activation at Fisherman's Wharf.

- **Little Embarcadero Improvements (BCDC Permit No. 1993.016.05):** Authorizes approximately 15,000 square feet of temporary promenade enhancements along the Little Embarcadero promenade, between Pier 43 and the Franciscan restaurant, for a period of two years, through October 31, 2027. The improvements include installing movable seating, pergolas, and planters to enhance the shoreline, activate the public

realm, and strategies to deter unpermitted vending. Intended as a prototype for future capital projects under the Port's Waterfront Resiliency Program, the installation is intended to support economic recovery while addressing public access issues caused by unpermitted vending, which has obstructed circulation and Bay views along the Promenade. The project will provide free or low-cost public amenities without long-term adverse impacts to shoreline access and will generally improve views and pedestrian flow.

- **SkyStar Wheel (BCDC Permit No. M2023.023.02):** Authorizes the installation and operation of a ferris wheel (the SkyStar Wheel) and associated program amenities in an existing parking lot at Seawall Lot 301 on the San Francisco waterfront. The project site is not located within any San Francisco Bay Plan-designated priority use areas, but is located within the Fisherman's Wharf area defined in the San Francisco Waterfront Special Area Plan. The SkyStar Wheel and associated facilities have a footprint of approximately 5,634 square feet, and are authorized through November 1, 2028.
- **Wharf J9 Temporary Floating Dock (BCDC Permit No. M2023.019.00):** Authorizes the replacement of a section of the dilapidated Wharf J9 with the construction of a temporary floating dock, between Al Scoma Way and Leavenworth Street at Pier 47 in Fisherman's Wharf. The new floating dock provides berths for small fishing boats and public access, and will remain in place for approximately 2 to 5 years, prior to the longer-term redevelopment project of Wharf J9. Since installation of the new dock, this section of Al Scoma Way has transformed into a pop-up fish market, quickly becoming a popular destination for locals looking to get fresh seafood directly from fishers.

## **Fisherman's Wharf Forward (Exhibits 9, 10, 11, 12)**

<https://www.sfport.com/fwforward>

The Fisherman's Wharf Forward project is a Port-initiated project that includes both near- and longer-term projects that will improve resilience and seismic stability in the area bordering the Inner Lagoon. This multiphase project aims to reinvigorate the heart of Fisherman's Wharf and create a new destination and reconnect visitors to the area. It will also advance seismic and sea level rise protections to ensure the historic area remains a vibrant destination for decades to come.

### *Temporary Projects*

- **Alioto's Plaza, or Taylor Street Plaza (BCDC Permit No. M2025.026.00):** Authorizes the construction of an approximately 5,500-square-foot public plaza, which will be in place for up to 7 years through July 31, 2033, at the location that was previously occupied by Alioto's Restaurant. The new public plaza will be built on the site of that is currently unoccupied after demolition of the Alioto's Restaurant building and will provide new public access, including view corridors to the Bay. The project will include the placement of various seating and interpretive elements, including picnic tables, benches, play structures, and an interpretive railing along the waterfront looking out at the inner lagoon.

- **Fisherman's Grotto Improvements (BCDC Permit No. 1976.104.01):** Authorizes the creation and maintenance of 1,500 square feet of outdoor dining space at Fisherman's Grotto Restaurant, with the placement of new planters and trash receptacles. Fisherman's Grotto is the neighboring building to the Alioto's Plaza site. Conditions in the permit require for a review of public access on the site once the Alioto's Plaza authorization expires. If the long-term use of the plaza site results in less public access than was provided at the time of this amendment, further public access and a review of the outdoor dining space at Fisherman Grotto's may be required.

#### *Near-Term Projects*

- **Smokehouse Overlook:** Along Al Scoma Way and across from the Wharf J9 Float, the smokehouse has been demolished to make room for a new and improved public overlook to take its place is scheduled for 2026. The overlook intends to provide scenic views into the inner lagoon and create more space for a pop-up market with a fish cleaning station and electricity hookup to support a crab cooking pot on site.
- **Harbor Walk Interpretive Signage:** Within the inner lagoon area, the Harbor Walk is an outdoor walking tour of the historic harbor that will inform viewers about the historical and current workings of the fishing industry. The intention of the program is to create an informative and known visitor attraction at the core of Fisherman's Wharf. The Harbor Walk comprises a series of signs that feature clear, engaging images, and short blocks of text. Signs will be affixed to railings and poles between Taylor Street and Al Scoma Way, with potential future expansion to include the Embarcadero near the Pier 43 arch.
- **Fish Market Programming:** The installation of the Wharf J9 float provided a new centralized location for off-the-boat fish sales on Al Scoma Way where visitors can buy fresh caught crab and fish direct from local fishers. Fishers currently sell their fresh catch pending weather and availability, with regular updates provided via social media. With a new overlook replacing the old smokehouse across the street, the Port plans to provide improvements at this location to support a recurring pop-up fish market. Improvements will include a fish cleaning station and electricity hookup to allow the use of a crab cooking pot on site.
- **Crab Wheel Plaza Programming:** Since 2023, the Fisherman's Wharf Community Benefits District (FWCBD) has hosted free Pier Party concerts every summer and fall in Crab Wheel Plaza. In 2025, they started smaller-scale activations, including free dance classes, a free Halloween workshop, and a 2-day holiday market. Additionally, FWCBD ambassadors place tables and chairs in the plaza daily for public use.
- **Pier 45 West Apron Replacement:** Pier 45 serves as the primary landing and distribution point for Northern California's fishing fleet, including a commercial seafood processing hub. The west apron, which is heavily used by fish processors, has deteriorated over time and needs major improvements to preserve commercial fishing operations and a full replacement of the west apron in the same footprint is needed.

The project includes demolition and removal of existing timber deck and substructure, followed by replacement with modern steel piles and a new 33,000-square-foot concrete deck. Work is expected to begin in the 2027 in-water work window.

- **Pier 45 Ice Machine Replacement:** Responding to a major request from the commercial fishing community at Pier 45, the Port is installing a new and improved industrial ice machine in Shed D. The existing ice machine will be removed, including proper abatement and disposal. The new ice machine is expected to be operational in early 2027.

*Project Schedule*

The Port has commenced conceptual design efforts for a large scale rebuild of the Taylor St. shoreline and inner lagoon, targeted for the 2030s. This rebuild will take into account sea level rise and resilience needs to protect the area for long-term commercial fishing, while providing an enhanced public draw for waterfront access, outdoor dining, Bay excursions, and an expanded seafood marketplace. Community engagement has begun and will continue through 2026, concurrent with data collection and concept development, culminating in selection of a preferred concept late this year. Detailed design and permitting is anticipated to take place through 2027 and 2028, with construction beginning in 2029-2030.

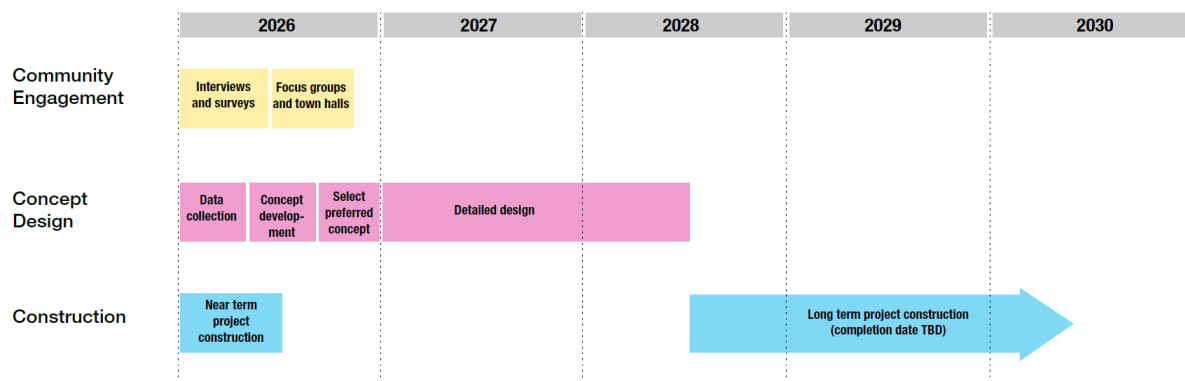


Figure 4 Project Schedule

**Fisherman’s Wharf Revialized (Exhibit 7, 8)**

In February 2023, the Port received an unsolicited proposal from a development team looking to make significant investments in Fisherman’s Wharf, specifically at the Triangle Lot, Little Embarcadero promenade, and Pier 45. With approval by the Port Commission in July 2023, and the Board of Supervisors in September 2023, the Port and Fisherman’s Wharf Revitalized entered into an exclusive negotiating agreement to explore partnership opportunities for a mixed-use project aiming to fully reimagine the future of this waterfront location in the heart of the Wharf. The development proposal continues to be refined and may include a phased project that activates the triangle lot in the near term and develops Pier 45 and the triangle lot

as part of the longer-term project. The proposed uses of the new development include new public space, retail, museum, and special event areas.

## Community Outreach and Engagement

### Community Vulnerability Assessment

The Commission has developed a Community Vulnerability Mapping Tool to help inform its analysis of how socioeconomic indicators and contamination burdens contribute to a community's vulnerability to climate change. The mapping tool collects information at the level of Census blocks using 2020 data and at the level of the Census tract using CalEnviroScreen 3.0. Commission staff use the tool to help identify communities with environmental justice burdens.

Fisherman's Wharf is located within a Census block with a reported population of 781 people in 2023. The mapping tool identifies the Census block as having High social vulnerability and Lower contamination vulnerability, based on the following social indicators in the 90th percentile: prevalence of renters, households with no vehicle, and the following social indicators in the 70th percentile: limited English proficiency, prevalence of non-U.S. Citizen residents, and very low-income residents.

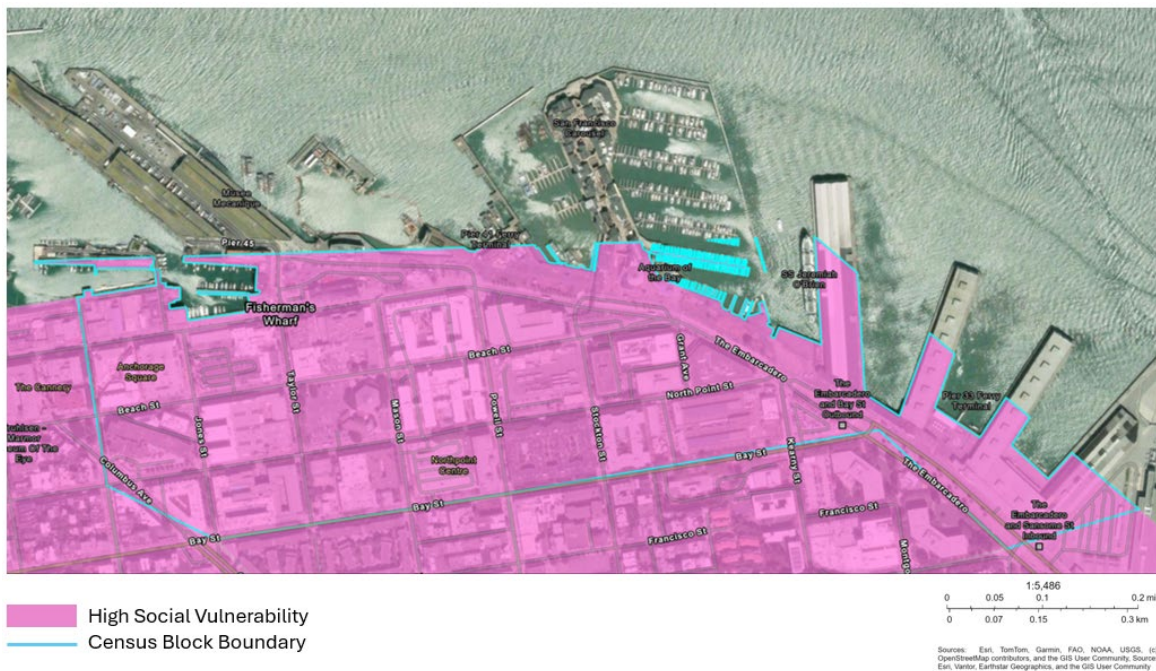


Figure 5 Community Vulnerability Assessment (2023)

### Community Engagement

Over the past 3 years, the development team has engaged in community outreach and have modified their plans to address the concerns and needs of the commercial fishing community and the public. The Port plans to continue extensive engagement with community groups and local stakeholders as designs are developed to identify priority uses for the Fisherman's Wharf area, including how to best support commercial opportunities and enhance the public experience for locals and visitors alike.