

THE FUTURE OF THE GEORGIA PACIFIC MILL SITE, COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY IN FORT BRAGG

Oversight by local and state authorities ensures responsible development that is accountable to the community and that properly addresses environmental, health, and safety needs.



Fort Bragg's iconic coastline, which includes Glass Beach, Pudding Creek Beach, the Pomo Bluffs and Noyo Headlands parks, is a treasured asset of the Fort Bragg community. Mendocino Railway (MR), the owner/operator of the Skunk Train, has purchased a large portion of Fort Bragg's former Mill Site abutting the Coastal Trail with the intent of pursuing a major development to expand railroad operations and build associated amenities. MR has cited a legal loophole that would exempt this development from local and state oversight. The City of Fort Bragg has filed litigation challenging this claim and is requesting MR follow normal project permitting procedures, just as all other individuals and businesses are required to.



Satellite image of former Georgia Pacific Mill Site (Google Earth)

FORT BRAGG Advocate-News

"The community has been steadfast over the years that reuse of the Mill Site should include a variety of zoning designations and land uses to meet community needs in order to promote environmental goals, protect public access, and diversify the economic base"

- Fort Bragg City Council Ad-Hoc Committee - Tess Albin-Smith and Lindy Peters

OWNERSHIP OF THE MILL SITE: A BRIEF HISTORY

Following generations of industrial logging activity, the City of Fort Bragg engaged in nearly 20 years of planning activities to identify an effective pathway for redevelopment and secure public input on local priorities. Meanwhile Georgia Pacific (GP) was working with the State Dept. of Toxic Substances Control Board (DTSC) to remediate sections of the Mill Site, in preparation for development or sale. For many years, two mill ponds remained to be cleaned; nevertheless, GP started to sell off its land. So, in 2019 the City started negotiations to purchase 210 acres on the southern portion of the Mill Site. In May 2021, after taking steps to secure financing and address environmental remediation needs, the City and GP came to a verbal understanding: the City would acquire 210 acres on the southern portion of the Mill Site, as well as 62 acres of Pudding Creek watershed.

Six months later GP abruptly transferred the land to MR. Now MR owns the land and has publicized extensive plans for expanding their railroad operations.

MENDOCINO RAILWAY'S CLAIM

Mendocino Railway operates the Skunk Train sightseeing excursion train but has claimed that it is a common carrier “public utility” providing an essential public service. MR has used this claim to argue that their future development on this land is exempt from local and state oversight. The fact is, they are not. The company is obligated to follow regulations as would any business or developer - including but not limited to the California Environmental Quality Act, California Coastal Act, and other state, local and federal regulations to ensure development occurs safely and sustainably, with public input during the planning process.



Coastal view of the former Georgia Pacific Mill Site

WHY OVERSIGHT IS IMPORTANT AND NECESSARY

Local oversight ensures that:

- The needs and character of the community are met.
- Environmental hazards are identified and avoided or remediated.
- Adequate water supply, sewer facilities, roads, solid waste, and other utilities are available and not negatively impacted.

State oversight of this land is also vital:

- The site is currently subject to orders by California's Department of Toxic Substance Control to ensure toxins from mill operations are removed and/or mitigated.
- The California Coastal Act enhances public access, protects natural resources, and helps balance coastal development in the public interest.