

County leaders insist on West Park developer's update

by Kendall Septon

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Four years after Stanislaus County entered into an exclusive agreement with Gerry Kamilos to develop an inland port at Crows Landing's former naval air station, one county leader says it might be time to move on to another developer.

Supervisor Jim DeMartini suggested at the Jan. 11 board of supervisors meeting that the county consider ending its agreement with Kamilos and seeking other proposals to develop the base property.

"Kamilos gave us a lot of promises years ago, and I haven't seen him follow through on one yet," DeMartini said a day after the meeting. "With a new supervisor on the board, there's a new dynamic, which makes it the prime time to bring this project back to us.

"I, for one, am ready for some answers."

Kamilos attributed delays on the project's environmental study to a costly legal challenge by the city of Patterson, which was resolved after two years last spring in the developer's favor. He is scheduled to present an update on the plans for West Park at Crows Landing, including details of a newly proposed solar component, during supervisors' March 8 meeting.

Specifically, DeMartini wants to know how the developer plans to finance the project and how adding a solar aspect might change the number of jobs the business park would create. Also a looming question, he said, is why the Port of Oakland has so far shown no interest in a rail link with the proposed industrial hub.

Kamilos defended West Park's progress this week, pointing out that all the preliminary technical, economic, traffic, operational and descriptive studies have been completed. West Park has also received endorsements from the Stanislaus Council of Governments, the San Joaquin Valley Partnership, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the San Joaquin Council of Governments, and it was approved by the California Transportation Commission to be eligible for a State Trade Corridor Infrastructure Grant, he said.

"West Park has spent over \$4 million to work in good faith with the county and has performed on all aspects of our agreement in some very challenging economic times," Kamilos wrote in an e-mail. "We've made significant progress for a project of this size, especially considering the legal and economic aspects that have played into the process."

In coming weeks, Kamilos said he plans to begin talks with city leaders in Patterson and Newman to discuss some of the changes to his proposals and solicit early feedback before presenting at the county level.

"It makes perfect sense to begin that dialogue with both cities, considering they will be the ones directly affected by the project; it's nothing new," he said.

Key aspects of his March presentation to supervisors will include details about the new 600-acre solar component, the financial situation to date and the types of jobs the project will create. Kamilos said he will also address the progress that has been made with the Port of Oakland and Union Pacific Railroad, and he expects to present letters of support from both entities at that time.

After attending a meeting of Kamilos, port officials and railroad representatives in December, the county's deputy executive officer, Keith Boggs, said he agreed that their discussions seemed promising. Still, Boggs was quick to echo county leaders' frustrations that the developer is overdue in presenting a detailed update.

"I think it's been clearly stated to him that he better come back with all of his T's crossed and I's dotted," Boggs said. "...We're beyond agreeing that this project is a good idea.

"Now it needs to move past the 'what ifs' and turn into a reality-based project."

DeMartini has been vocal since the beginning about his distaste for West Park and his distrust of Kamilos. But his colleagues on the board — including District 3 Supervisor Terry Withrow, who replaced the project's most outspoken supporter, Jeff Grover — have hesitated to take a position.

"I'm very concerned about the project and always have been, but I have to withhold judgment until I've got all the details in front of me," Withrow said. "I want to be able to look at the entire package to see how viable this project is today."

Kamilos would not speak to whether he was troubled by DeMartini's suggestion to consider canceling the county's exclusive agreement with West Park. However, he said he would continue to focus on completing the required permits and pre-construction work over the next 15 months.

"A project update presented to the county board of supervisors is appropriate; securing guidance from the board is needed; but termination, given all of our good-faith efforts to successfully work with the county, is not," he wrote.