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Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

The land has been used by duck hunters in recent years. Proposals to develop it were debated for more than a decade.

## Humbug Marsh project takes step closer to reality

New plan for homes, golf course OK'd, but opposition is strong

By David Shepardson / The Detroit News

**GIBRALTAR** -- After more than five years of debate, a Detroit developer this week moved a step closer to beginning construction on a controversial 300-home community Downriver.

By a 6-to-1 City Council vote Monday night, Made in Detroit won approval of a preliminary site plan for a 296-home community on 406 acres of undeveloped land in Gibraltar and Trenton that borders the Detroit River.

The project on land known as Humbug Marsh -- initially valued at \$350 million -- also would include a nine-hole golf course and many luxury homes costing more than \$1 million. Made in Detroit hasn't revealed the precise value of the scaled-back development.

Environmental activists bitterly opposed the project, saying it would harm wetlands and ruin the last major undeveloped stretch on the American side of the Detroit River.

The land has principally been used by duck hunters in recent years and proposals to develop the land have



Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

**Blair McGowan, with the 500-member Friends of the Detroit River, says the developer must get state and federal permits before work can proceed.**

### What's next

\* Made in Detroit hopes to break ground on the project and open model homes on the land by spring 2003.

\* The company pledges to pay overdue taxes owed on the land within the next 30 days.

\* Gibraltar and Trenton's city councils must both still approve final designs.

\* U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Michigan Department of Environmental Quality are expected to say whether they will require permits for Made in Detroit to go forward. Opponents may go to court to try to block the project.

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been debated for more than a decade.

Only Councilwoman Kathleen Law voted to reject the preliminary site plan.

"I think we should wait and get all the information before we approve this plan," Law said.

But other council members and Mayor Richard Kuhn, who approved the request, stressed that the vote was only for a preliminary site design and that other regulators would weigh in on the final decision.

"This is a state and federal issue. They are the ones that will have to make the decision as to whether this plan conforms with environmental laws," said Scott Denison, a city councilman.

Made in Detroit has said the project will boost the local economy and has accused some -- including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers -- of racism in opposing the project.

"We're very pleased with the council's approval," said William Merriweather, the chairman of Made in Detroit, said on Monday. "We expect to be under way, with lots ready by spring 2003."

Merriweather said they have revised the plan so it no longer requires the filling of about 4 1/2 acres of wetlands.

Merriweather says no further federal or state permits are required to go forward.

Others, such as Blair McGowan of Grosse Ile, who is active with the 500-member Friends of the Detroit River, says Made in Detroit still must get state and federal permits before any project can proceed.

"We are trying to do whatever we can to stop this proposal," McGowan said. "This is a critically important part of our natural heritage. Once it's gone, it's gone."

McGowan said his group would like to see the land purchased, and not developed.

He noted that Made in Detroit hasn't

## Key events in proposed development

### Dec. 31 1997

Made In Detroit Inc. buys 409 acres in Gibraltar from Waste Management of Michigan for \$3.2 million in what is known as Humbug Marsh. It proposes a \$350 million, 340-unit luxury home development and a nine-hole golf course on one of the last undeveloped stretches along the Detroit River.

### Aug. 31, 1999

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers denies a permit to let the project go forward. The Corps said only 150-200 acres of the 409 could be developed.

### Oct. 28, 1999

Made In Detroit appeals Corps decision.

### Jan. 12, 2000

Wayne County Circuit Judge Louis F. Simmons Jr. finds Made In Detroit encroached on state protected land in 1998. In May, he retracts the order, saying he made a mistake.

### Spring 2001

Made in Detroit scales back its plans to about 295 homes and agrees not to develop 4.5 acres of wetlands that it had sought to fill. It says by not touching wetlands, it is not required to get further permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers or Michigan Department of Environmental Quality -- a view not shared by some environmental activists.

### Nov. 29, 2001

Federal Judge George Steeh dismisses lawsuit challenging the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' decision.

### May 2002

Made in Detroit reaches agreement with its banks to halt a planned foreclosure sale on the land, because Made in Detroit had fallen behind on its loan repayment.

### Aug. 19, 2002

A public hearing on Made in Detroit's plans in Gibraltar draws about 50 area residents, with nearly all opposed to the plan.

### Aug. 26, 2002

Gibraltar City Council approves by a 6-1 vote the preliminary site plan for the development. It orders sidewalks to be built and says Made in Detroit must prove it doesn't need state or federal permits before it approves final site plan. It has one year to win final approval before the preliminary approval expires.

paid some back taxes owed on the property.

Merriweather said the taxes would be paid within a month.

Two years ago, the Gibraltar City Council approved a preliminary site plan for developing the land, but that expired as Made in Detroit unsuccessfully asked a federal judge to overturn the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers decision to deny a permit to fill in some wetlands as part of the project.

The project includes 356 acres in Gibraltar and about 280 of the homes. In Trenton, there are 53 acres and 14 homes. Made in Detroit said it would petition the Trenton City Council to approve that portion of the preliminary site plan, as well.

The project continues to attract the eye of state and federal politicians and sparks debate by many Downriver residents.

A public hearing earlier this month drew a standing room only crowd of more than 50 area residents -- nearly all of whom opposed the project.

State Rep. George Mans, D-Trenton, a candidate for state Senate, addressed the city council and asked it to delay a decision until "you have all the facts."

"The unique piece of property must be given the benefit of the most careful and far-reaching detailed review to be sure it is allowed to be utilized in a manner that benefits the public at large," Mans said.

But others said the city must respect the property rights of landowners and allow Made in Detroit to develop the project so long as it complies with state and federal environmental laws.

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