

Report: Meta's Willow Village project aims to build around Native American site

Environmental study of new Menlo Park neighborhood also cites impacts to air quality and traffic

By Lloyd Lee

With Meta's plans to completely redevelop a 59-acre office park on Willow Road into a new neighborhood — replete with more office space, housing units, a hotel and a grocery store,

among a slew of other amenities — there's bound to be significant impacts to the environment during and after construction. Those effects range from impacts to air quality, noise, transportation and the potential of disturbing human remains, according to a newly released

draft environmental impact report on the development.

Meta's Willow Village has the potential to dig up Native American remains and destroy an archaeological site. That's due to the unique location of the development. Experts believe that an ancient Native American

village is buried beneath the ground there.

"There will be burials there. There's no doubt about it." Michael Wilcox, archaeology professor at Stanford University, told the Almanac in 2019. The land where Meta will develop is an archeology site known as

Hiller mound, he said.

To reduce the level of impact to the burial site, the developer proposes construction techniques that essentially attempt to build around the Hiller mound as much as possible to

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avoid penetrating its boundaries, preserving the site in place.

If disturbance to the site can't be avoided, then the developer proposes that to seek sensitivity training, in which "Native American tribal representatives shall conduct tribal cultural sensitivity training for workers and construction superintendents."

"There is a high likelihood that the project will result in the disturbance of burials and the destruction of cultural resources. We hope that (Meta) will consult and work closely with the tribe as this project unfolds," Monica Arellano, vice chair of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area, previously said in a written statement. She serves as the point person of contact whenever excavation work uncovers potential Native American human remains.

As part of the state-mandated CEQA process, Meta and Willow Village's developer, Signature Development Group, must pay for consultants hired by the city to prepare an extensive study called an environmental impact report (EIR) that details the scope of the project, timeline and the potential environmental impacts as well as any plans to mitigate them, if possible, all of which will be reviewed and must be approved by Menlo Park's planning commission in order to move plans forward.

On April 8, the city released the nearly 1,000-page draft EIR, which is now open to public review and comments for at least 45 days, with a public hearing expected in the next planning commission meeting on April 25.

Some environmental impacts will be unavoidable — several of which have previously been recognized by the planning commission.

"The elephant in the room is, for this project, the elephant in the room for all of our Bayfront

projects, which is transportation," Commissioner Henry Riggs said in 2019.

The report recognizes that it will have "potentially significant" impacts to traffic without any mitigation, with more than 20,000 daily net new trips generated on the roadways.

But there are other significant impacts that a development of this scope could bring.

One that the report lists as unavoidable, even with mitigation measures, is the cumulative negative impact on air quality.

There's also the potential to significantly impact surrounding wildlife, state-protected wetlands and other natural habitats.

Some of the possible mitigation measures include avoiding or reducing the amount of wetland vegetation removed near the project's site. But if that can't be avoided, the report proposes to either restore the impacted habitats or provide a new one in an appropriate location or through purchasing "mitigation credits" that can compensate for unavoidable wetland losses.

The developer also proposes to remove 760 existing trees, 266 of which are heritage trees, which will require tree removal permits, and plant 822 new trees.

The developer anticipates Willow Village will be completed in two phases by late 2026, with demolition to begin as soon as mid-2022.

An online version of the draft EIR can be reviewed at bit.ly/3E8vhcR.

Copies of the report are available at Menlo Park Library, at 800 Alma Street, and the Belle Haven Branch Library at 413 Ivy Drive.

Written comments can be addressed to Kyle Perata, acting planning manager of City of Menlo Park, at 701 Laurel Street. Comments can also be emailed, which is preferred, to ktperata@menlopark.org. ■

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Courtesy Meta/Signature Development

A rendering of what Meta's new offices could look like at Willow Village. The developer plans to use a timber-based construction method to reduce carbon emissions.