

Condemned no more; 50 years after huge earthquake, building moratorium expiring in Valdez

By Yereth Rosen | Arctic | Mar. 23rd, 2014

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Fifty years ago, as the steamship Chena was unloading its cargo in the bustling Valdez harbor, the entire town shuddered, the ground at the waterfront fell away, and waterfront structures collapsed, pulling down the people on them. North America's most powerful recorded earthquake was underway, its epicenter just 45 miles to the west. Tsunamis finished off much of what was left. Thirty-three people in Valdez died, including children on the collapsed dock who had come to welcome the Chena and its deliveries of fresh fruit and Easter flowers.

Afterward, the entire town was condemned by federal officials as unsafe and uninhabitable, remaining structures were razed and the city of Valdez was moved 4 miles and rebuilt on more stable, alluvial-gravel ground.

About all that is left of old Valdez, besides a lovingly crafted model on display at the local museum, is overgrown tidal flats, where keen-eyed visitors can spot remnants of the former post office and a few other structures, some memorial signs and a lot of empty space.

That may not be the case for long.

A 50-year building moratorium slapped on the site by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will expire at the end of the month.

In anticipation, the city's planning and zoning commission is working on a master plan to figure out what to do with the old town site, most of which is city-

owned, said Lisa Von Barga, Valdez's director of community and economic development. She takes a cautious tone when asked about the site's future.

"Just because the condemnation is gone doesn't mean the seismic or geological hazards go away," she said.

Among the hazards: sinkholes that could open up in the silty ground without any earthquake whatsoever. "The old town area is subject to liquefaction at any time, without any seismically-induced event," she said.

John Aho, chairman of the Alaska Seismic Hazards Commission and one of the scientists who advised officials during the post-earthquake rebuilding, is confident that new buildings will not rise in the most dangerous part of old Valdez. "Nobody would ever build in that area again," he said.

But there have already been some cracks in the 50-year-old moratorium. Though the waterfront area of old Valdez has been left largely untouched, development in past decades has encroached on its edges.

In 1980s, the city split the former townsite into three zones, with the 471-acre waterfront heart of old Valdez -- the most dangerous area -- designated as "Zone A," a place where any kind of construction is strictly verboten. A 1983 DOWL Engineers hazards study written for the city said that area is "highly susceptible" to ground failure and wave damage. Any future big earthquake would mean a "high" likelihood of deaths and total loss of all economic property in the area, the study said.

Still, city officials about a decade ago put a king salmon pond in Zone A. Fish return to the area these days -- though not to the pond itself, Von Barga said.

Another area, Zone B, covers a little more than 1,000 acres. It sits farther inshore than the core of the old town and is considered somewhat safer, with death risks from a future big earthquake rated as "moderate" -- though economic property

could also be subject to total loss, according to the DOWL report. The engineers said that if any building is occurs, structures should be small.

In Zone B, a small amount "light industrial" development exists, Von Bargaen said. That zone now holds a dog kennel, a mechanics shop and a storage facility, she said.

In a third, fairly small part of the old town still farther inland, designed as Zone C, some building has also been allowed. The hazards in Zone C, are rated as low to moderate in the DOWL report.

There have been plans already floated for some bigger development projects in old Valdez. A fishmeal plant was proposed for Zone A and a recreational-vehicle park was proposed for Zone B, said Laura Robertson, a senior planning technician with the city's community and economic development department. Both plans died on their own before the city had an opportunity to act on them, she said.

Other development proposals might be coming in now.

"People are kind of excited about the condemnation expiring," Robertson said.

The hazards in old Valdez's waterfront area likely too daunting to allow any new construction -- for financial institutions and insurance companies asked to back projects, if not for developers themselves, Von Bargaen said. But Andrew Goldstein, curator of the Valdez Museum, is not so sure that developers can resist the temptation of new scenic ground.

It may be impossible for would-be developers to get financing or insurance, he concedes. "Nevertheless, people being people and property being property, there are going to be people interested in that land," Goldstein said. "The museum has been acutely aware of that because we would like to see at least a portion of that land protected as some sort of heritage site."

Neither the city nor the state has gotten around to meeting the formalities of establishing any kind of historic-preservation status for the site. So far, the city has not even created a local historical preservation commission, Goldstein said.

Preservation is desirable, but some of the efforts to date have been bedeviled by such problems as chronic vandalism, Von Bargaen said.

The local Pioneers of Alaska group, which has plans for several preservation initiatives, organized a project to erect signs marking the lost town's streets, she said. The signs were stolen.

For now, old Valdez is used largely by sightseers and recreationalists. Summer tourists occasionally venture out to the site, but casual observers may miss the relics, Goldstein said.

In the winter, cross-country skiers and showshoers visit the old town to enjoy its sweeping vistas and great beauty, Von Bargaen said. An annual snowmobile race is staged in the area, and the site is a good place to watch birds and walk dogs.

"You can get right onto the beach or the waterfront and get views of the entire bay," she said.

Any modern activities -- or ideas about redevelopment -- are tempered with respect for the site's history, she said. "The area, it's a bit spiritual, I would say. You understand that there's a bit of a ghost of what used to be," Von Bargaen said.

<https://www.adn.com/science/article/50-years-later-earthquake-inspired-building-moratorium-expiring-old-valdez/2014/03/23/>