

S.F. Mayor Considers Treasure Island Swap

By Alex Barnum
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Mayor Willie Brown told a senior Clinton administration official yesterday that he was open to the idea of including Treasure Island as part of a land swap for the Headwaters Forest, a long contested grove of ancient redwoods in Humboldt County.

Brown's receptivity removes one potential hurdle to a deal, but Deputy Interior Secretary John Garamendi stressed after a meeting with the mayor that Treasure Island is only one of many properties being discussed for a possible swap and that a deal of any kind is still far from certain.

"We now know the mayor is interested in pursuing the issue," Garamendi said after emerging from the half-hour afternoon session. But he cautioned: "No one should bank on this being the deal. It's very difficult, very complex and it may not work. But certainly we'll fail if we don't try."

In an effort to resolve a decade-old conflict over the forest — and fend off a lawsuit pending against the U.S. government — federal and state officials are trying to negotiate a deal in which Houston-based Maxxam Inc. would trade the 3,000 acre Headwaters grove, plus a 1,500-acre buffer zone, for other state or federal land.

The Headwaters is the largest unprotected virgin redwood grove left on the continent. Maxxam, which acquired it in its 1986 hostile takeover of Pacific Lumber Co., has been blocked from logging the forest by environmental laws. It recently sued the federal government for violation of its property rights.

In addition to Treasure Island, government officials have talked about offering federal oil fields, timberland, office buildings, commercial property and other vacant military bases. But the fact that Garamendi is sounding out Brown's support indicates that Treasure Island may have particular appeal.

Built in 1938-39 as a Depression-era public works project, man-made Treasure Island is a poten-



Mayor Willie Brown says he is open to a proposal to include Treasure Island in a land swap

tially lucrative development opportunity. San Francisco's plan to convert the former Navy base calls for hotels, a major theme park, film studios and housing. It could be attractive to Maxxam, which has interests in commercial development, in addition to timber.

But whoever develops the island faces many obstacles, including financing, environmental concerns and, perhaps most importantly, earthquake retrofitting. The developer would also have to subsidize low income housing and ferry service. In signaling his receptivity yesterday, Brown said that Maxxam would have to conform to the conversion plan.

A major hurdle for any land swap, whether or not it involves Treasure Island, is opposition from environmentalists. The groups closest to the controversy over the last decade have expressed dismay with the talks, saying they fall far short of the 60,000 acres needed to protect important habitat for the coho salmon and the imperiled marbled murrelet.

Dan Hamburg, a former Democratic congressman from Mendocino County whose bill to preserve 57,000 acres including the Headwaters and adjacent land passed the House in 1994 but died in the Senate, attacked the swap as insufficient. He said the government had a fair chance of fighting Maxxam's property rights suit in the courts.

But Terry Gorton, assistant secretary of the state Resources Agency, defended the goal of the negotiations. "It's very important to keep our eye on the goal of bringing resolution" she said. "Any asset that will help bring about public ownership of the Headwaters should be considered."

Staff writer John King contributed to this report.