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A VIEW FROM HARBOR STREET

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What's Up With The WRF?

By David Buckingham, City Manager



What is going on with our Water Reclamation Facility project?

The City has been reviewing our preferred WRF location during the last several months – considering a change from the Rancho Colina site to the Righetti Ranch. The notes below provide an overview of some key points of the process, and we encourage all Morro Bay residents to read our in-depth, easy to understand report on the status of the project.

We'd love for you to share your thoughts. That report can be found at this link: <http://www.morro-bay.ca.us/DocumentCenter/View/9387>

The City has worked for over 10 years to replace our failing Waste Water Treatment Plant, initially considering renovation then reconstruction at its current location.

The WWTP uses technology that is more than 50 years old, dumps 1 million gallons of precious water into the ocean each day, and sits in a flood plain/tsunami zone on 26 oceanfront acres. It must be replaced.

The California Coastal Commission abjectly denied a permit to rebuild on the existing site in January 2013. The WWTP must be moved.

Community outreach resulted in a set of goals for the new project. These goals, which include controlling costs, echo Coastal Commission and City General Plan requirements for the new plant to produce recycled water. The facility is called a Water Reclamation Facility and should be at a location that supports water reuse, while controlling costs.

Water reclamation means wastewater will be processed and treated to very high standards, allowing it to be used for purposes like agriculture or injection back into the aquifer. Reclaiming the 1 million gallons of water dumped into the ocean is sound policy - environmentally and fiscally.

The new WRF will use the cleanest, most compatible technology available to reach this water reclamation goal - either a Membrane Bio-Reactor (MBR) or Sequencing Batch Reactor (SBR), with microfiltration and ultraviolet disinfection, for water reclamation.

Our old-school WWTP includes 12 open-air beds where processed solid waste dries in the sun, and seven open air wastewater processes. The MBR / SBR facility planned for Morro Bay will be completely indoors to contain noise and light and have an air filtration system to control odor.

The City's initial comprehensive research and analysis completed in December 2013 considered 17 sites, and ended with a top seven based on the City's goals.

Council reviewed that report and directed staff to conduct further feasibility analysis on four sites: Rancho Colina, Righetti, Giannini and "Tri-W." Toro Creek was eliminated from the top seven due to cost and limitations on reuse of water.

In May 2014 relying on expert analysis and assessment in a further report, the Council directed staff to focus on the Morro Valley sites of Rancho Colina and Righetti, with an initial focus on Rancho Colina.

The City Council established the Water Reclamation Facility Citizens Advisory Committee (WRFCAC) almost two years ago to provide technical project advice. The committee is integrally involved in the process, meeting more than 25 times.

Because the Morro Valley sites are in the Coastal zone, staff has consulted closely with the California Coastal Commission. The City received a formal notification letter from the Commission in December 2013 that both the Righetti and Rancho Colina sites appeared to be suitable for detailed environmental review.

The owner of the Rancho Colina property informed the City in October 2015 the low flat ground previously offered was no longer available, and offered a new site. The City began to assess the new site at Rancho Colina, and also refocused on our top comparative alternative, the Righetti site.

Staff completed negotiation of a Memorandum of Understanding securing an option to purchase the Righetti property on January 26. Negotiation for Rancho Colina is continuing.

The WRFCAC and Council began to formally consider modifying the City's site preference from Rancho Colina to Righetti once the option to purchase the site was secured. The WRFCAC and Council considered this question at a joint meeting on February 8. The City held a Neighborhood Workshop on February 25 focused on the Nutmeg/Ponderosa neighborhoods. On March 1 the WRFCAC again considered the item, recommending a 60-day pause to conduct additional public education and outreach, and to reconsider two previously eliminated sites.

The City Council is scheduled to review and provide direction at its March 8 meeting, which is after the publication deadline of this column.

It is likely the City will be conducting additional public outreach in the weeks ahead and residents wanting to participate in this process – important to the entire City – are encouraged to

sign up for “City News” notifications in the “Notify Me” section of the City website (www.morrobayca.gov); or check the “Hot Topics” section of the website for updates; and to consider visiting the City’s Facebook page (facebook.com/cityofmorrobay) where all meetings and the latest info on many City activities are posted.

Note: This editorial first appeared in Bay News on September 3, 2015.