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A VIEW FROM HARBOR STREET

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The New WRF - Balancing Competing Priorities

By David Buckingham, City Manager



The WRF site selection process is a great example of democracy - effective public participation and responsive elected officials.

We've seen a number of site preference changes in the past six months, changes in the past six weeks, and perhaps changes in the weeks ahead. The process is continuing, and continued public participation is essential for the community as a whole to end up with the best possible site. That should occur only after thoughtful considerations from every essential perspective, including construction and operation costs, the value we place on the input and desires of our residents and costs that can result from uncertainty.

In the past few months the City has been faced with a change in circumstance that led to reconsideration of the Rancho Colina site. The City's 2013 "Options Report" ranked Rancho Colina as the number 1 preferred site, Righetti 2nd, Tri-W 3rd, and Giannini 4th.

The City focused on those sites from the beginning, with construction, operation and maintenance costs being a prime consideration in selecting a possible site. Other key goals include designing for effective reuse of the reclaimed water, ensuring neighborhood compatibility, and considering opportunities for energy recovery. These goals were fashioned based on robust public input three years ago.

Of those goals, construction and maintenance costs – the costs that are passed on to customers in the form of sewer rates – have been, perhaps, the driving concern. This expensive undertaking, to move our wastewater plant off the beach, as required, and to capture and reuse the million gallons per day of treated water we dump into the ocean, is having a significant effect on sewer rates. Thus the City has been focused from the beginning on keeping total project costs as low as possible (to keep future rates lower for utility customers) – and letting that goal lead many of our decisions.

This disciplined and scientific site search ultimately focused on two sites, Rancho Colina and Righetti, driven primarily by costs since the Morro Valley is the best area for use of reclaimed water, and, thus, wherever the facility is finally located, reclaimed water will need to be piped back to the Morro Valley.

The focus narrowed to Rancho Colina as one of two best options with the understanding the property owner was a willing seller. When that was found to be problematic, the City turned its focus to further investigating our primary alternative, the Righetti site, especially since the property was for sale.

When the Council received concerns from nearby residents about the Righetti site, the City Council directed staff to continue its search, while still considering both the top-tier Righetti and Rancho Colina sites. The City has identified another promising Morro Valley site, but again there are concerned citizens very close by, and we are continuing the search.

Staff have reanalyzed a previously considered location, the “County Tri-W” site, again keeping public input in mind. That reanalysis considered not only construction, operation and maintenance costs, but also other costs raised by risks caused by uncertainty regarding actual commencement and completion of the needed project. We have also continued to consider input from concerned citizens, which is very valuable to this process.

While the “County Tri-W” site remains measurably more expensive than the Morro Valley sites, the possibility of substantial cost increases in the Morro Valley caused by the risks of taking too long to begin and complete this essential project may be good reason to consider Tri-W, even though the costs of construction and operation are higher.

Further, when “cost” is more evenly balanced with other project goals, the Tri-W site may even be more attractive. Tri-W could likely provide plenty of space for a renewable energy component, a City corporation yard, and, for some residents close to the Morro Valley, better fits the neighborhood compatibility goal.

To be clear, the Morro Valley sites remain excellent possibilities – they are feasible, meet many of the City’s goals, and when considering construction and maintenance costs, they are less expensive. However, taking all costs, risks and values into consideration, there may be an opportunity to better serve the whole community’s needs at Tri-W.

The basic question may be: Is it worth choosing a site that is about 5-15 million dollars more expensive to better achieve some of the other project goals? Those goals include siting the new WRF in a place that may be best for all of Morro Bay’s neighborhoods, while also likely avoiding what could be very costly project delays due to risk and uncertainty.

What do you think? The City Council will be further considering all of this information at their May 10 meeting. The Council does not intend to make a final decision at that meeting, but will be considering the new information staff has compiled during the current “60-day pause.” Send an email with your thoughts to dbuckingham@morrobayca.gov.

Note: This editorial first appeared online in the Bay News on May 4, 2016.