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Sewage fumes from San Jose plant waft into Milpitas; fix would cost San Jose millions

By Dean Schaffer | 25 Jan 2011

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An artist's rendering of what one portion of the San Jose/Santa Clara Water Pollution Control Plant will look like when completed. (Photo courtesy of San Jose Environmental Services Department)

Something in Milpitas stinks, and San Jose is debating whether to spend millions of dollars to fix it.

In April, the San Jose City Council plans to vote on a 30-year, billion-dollar master plan for renovating the San Jose/Santa Clara Water Pollution Control Plant, the main sewage processing plant for eight cities in the South Bay. The plant's website says it processes about 110 million gallons of wastewater per day.

The proposed plan includes measures to reduce noxious odors that the plant generates. When the plant opened in 1956, said Jennifer Garnett, a spokesperson for the city's Environmental Services Department, "it was built basically open-air. We don't capture the odors in any way."

Little has changed since. After the plant removes solid waste from wastewater, it deposits the solid sludge outside in drying lagoons, using heat from the sun to dry it. The method is energy-efficient — but smelly.

Kathleen Phalen, Milpitas's utility engineer, noted that the prevailing winds generally blow the odors east, out of San Jose and into Milpitas. Odor control is "very much a priority for the city," she said, noting that Milpitas residents have complained about the smell of sewage for years. But the San Jose City Council, facing a large expense to solve a problem in a neighboring community, does not even acknowledge that its plant creates the offending odors.

Even so, Garrett said the draft master plan does include odor-control measures at multiple stages in the plant's treatment process, but it postpones the drying phase changes until 10 to 15 years into the project.

Milpitas businessman Joey McCarthy Jr. wants San Jose to fix the problem sooner. His family's company, McCarthy Ranch, has owned property in Milpitas since 1850. He has been trying to sell some of it, without success.

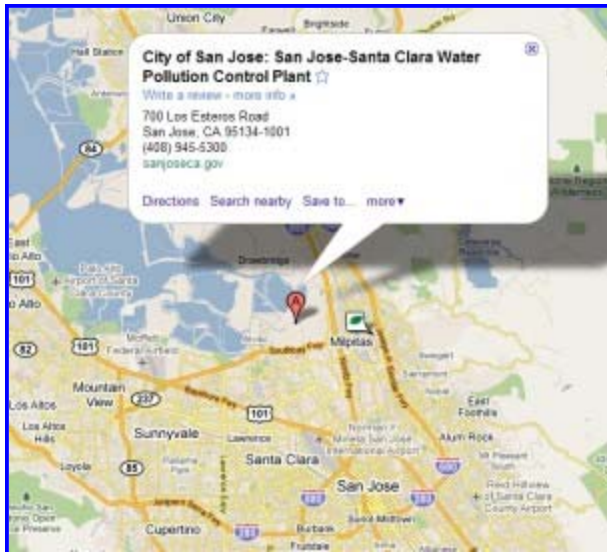
"We've had potential people to purchase the property and develop it," he said, "and all across the board," they have complained about "odors and the impact it's had on their desire to purchase the property."

To persuade the San Jose City Council and the city's Environmental Services Department to make odor control an immediate priority, McCarthy hired Dustin DeRollo last summer as a lobbyist and consultant.

DeRollo collected almost two dozen letters from restaurants, hotels and residents in Milpitas saying "the city should do all it can to make the necessary improvements to eliminate the odors emitted from the plant that make it past the plant's property line." With a few exceptions, the letters are heavily based on a template DeRollo provided, which is a common tactic among lobbyists.

DeRollo used these letters to create what McCarthy called a "package" that also included an economic analysis of the odors' impact, potential solutions and the results of a telephone survey San Jose conducted. The survey, which polled residents in San Jose, Santa Clara, Milpitas and Cupertino, showed that respondents considered "reducing odors from the plant's sludge to protect the people who live near it" one of their highest priorities.

DeRollo and McCarthy have presented their package to San Jose council members, as well as to the Environmental Services Department and other city agencies, in an effort to convince the city that waiting to address the odors would not only prolong a nuisance but would also hinder development in the affected area. A summary letter in the package argues that addressing odors now would make properties in the area "immediately marketable and more valuable," which would generate jobs and taxes for both San Jose and Milpitas.



This map shows the location of the water treatment plant in relation to Milpitas.

In December, San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed and Council Members Madison Nguyen and Kansen Chu issued a memo recognizing the odor issue, but they hesitated to attribute it to San Jose's plant. "Staff should determine if the plant is the source of the odors and prioritize the elimination of the odors generated by plant operations," it said.

To trace the odors' source, the Environmental Services Department plans to conduct an odor study, but, as planned, some of its components may raise eyebrows. Consultants will be "basically going around and smelling to try to understand where the odors are coming from," Garnett said. After this initial phase, Garnett said the city will establish monitoring stations at the sites that have notable odors.

Reed said in an email that "identifying the source of the odors will help determine the sequence of the upgrades necessary and allow us to focus resources on specific elements of plant operations that need attention."

The consultants will look at, and sniff, the plant itself, Garnett said, and also the nearby Newby Island Landfill and Compost Facility, a Milpitas pump station that conveys wastewater to the plant and the Zanker Road Resource Recovery Facility, which is a recycling facility. Garnett contended that Newby Island is a significant source of odors that residents may sometimes mistakenly attribute to the plant.

McCarthy conceded that Newby Island also causes odors but still pointed to the plant as the main offender.

He added that, although he and DeRollo have not yet reached their goals, he believes they have made substantial progress. When San Jose released its first draft of the master plan in 2008, he said, "they totally ignored odors and didn't address them at all in their plan until we had talked to the council members."

Garnett disagreed. "Odor control has always been part of what we wanted to do," she said, though previous drafts of the plan "didn't have the specifics on the technologies." She attributed the increased emphasis on odor reduction to the Environmental Services Department's outreach efforts, which have included community meetings and public tours of the plant. So far, 9,000 people have visited.

“We’ve had a very transparent process,” she asserted, “and we have listened to and solicited input from just about everybody we could think of.

“I know we’ve put our best effort forward to listen to the McCarthys’ and other stakeholders’ input,” she added. “Controlling odors is a very big priority of ours, and we want to do that as quickly as possible.”

In response to McCarthy and DeRollo’s complaints about the scheduling of odor-related renovations, Garnett said that other projects—like the plant’s deteriorating electrical infrastructure—simply must come first.

“We have to address the things that are in the worst condition first,” she said. “Another voice in the room would say, ‘Well, they’re going to get to the odor control at some point. Why should we pay extra to speed up the process?’”

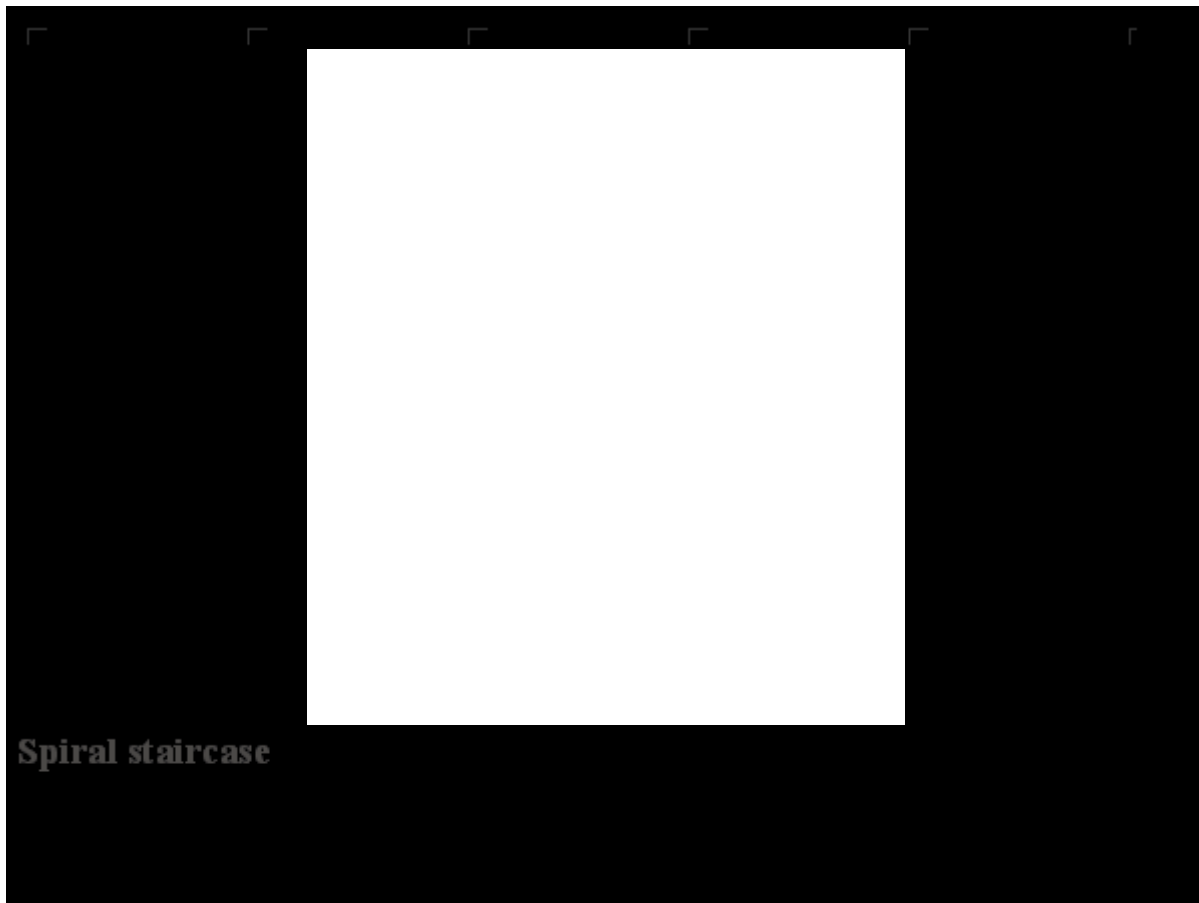
Official estimates peg the cost of renovating the plant’s drying process alone at about \$250 to \$300 million. Of that sum, \$15-20 million would go toward odor reduction methods, plus increased operating costs of about \$10 million per year. Renovations to reduce odors at other phases of the waste treatment process may cost up to \$50 million each.

DeRollo said he has identified cheaper methods of reducing odor and said he believes the actual motivation for the delay is political.

“Out of sight, out of mind,” he said, suggesting that the San Jose City Council would be taking a more aggressive stance if the winds blew the plant’s odors back into San Jose. “Just because you learn to live with it doesn’t make it right.”

San Jose will host its next community workshops about the master plan between Jan. 19 and 29 in San Jose, Santa Clara, Cupertino and Milpitas. For details, visit www.rebuildtheplant.org.

Photo Gallery: Stanford professor and professional photographer Robert Dawson worked for six months with San Jose’s Cultural Affairs Office and Environmental Services Department. Below are a few of the photos he took as the city’s first photographer-in-residence at the San Jose/Santa Clara Water Pollution Control Plant.



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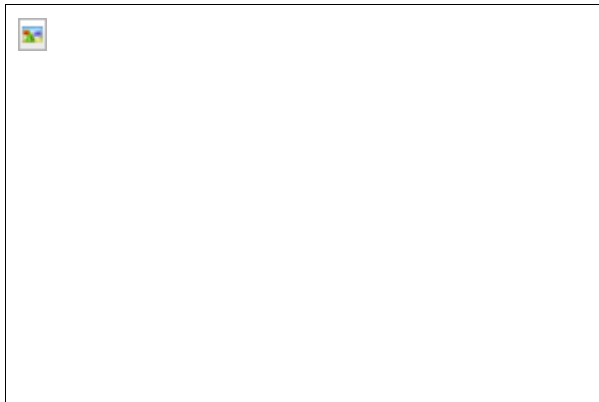
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