

Herhold: Columnist takes tour of San Jose sewage plant

By [Scott Herhold](#)

[Mercury News](#)

Article Launched: 09/10/2008 01:23:28 PM PDT

Once things are flushed down the toilet in my household, I rarely ponder their destination. In a word, it's icky. So I was astounded to learn how many people care.

I'm talking about one of the sleeper hits of the year, the tour of San Jose's sewage plant. Once a week, a total of 150 people go through the plant — 4,000 this year.

Sign up now and you won't get a spot until next February or March. That makes it the equivalent of an enduring Broadway hit. And so far, concierges haven't cracked the code of the waiting list.

"We were totally shocked," said John Stufflebean, San Jose's director of environmental services. "Our goal was to put through 2,000 in a year, and we thought that was a stretch."

Any columnist worth his salt had to see this in action. So last Saturday, after a 10-week wait, I took the tour. I give it at least three stars.

It began at the suitably early hour of 9 a.m., when a group of roughly 75 of us crowded into a conference room in the administration building of the formally named Water Pollution Control Plant (Sewage treatment has an infinite number of euphemisms, some unintentionally funny).

Before us was proof of what the treatment plant does: a half-dozen jars of fluid that traced the evolution from raw sewage to 99-percent clean effluent, clear to the naked eye.

"We're all about separating solids from water," explained Stufflebean, a lanky man who has pushed the plant in new environmental directions. "In a nutshell, that's what we do."

Begun in 1956, and expanded considerably since on land near Alviso, the plant can treat 167 million gallons of water a day, although peak flows can be much higher (And yes, the biggest flow of the year occurs about 10 to 12 hours after Super Bowl halftime).

To tour this work, we climbed into air-conditioned buses that masked the faint odor of the place. The guide on our bus was Bill Buffington, a brawny and genial 28-year veteran who supervises mechanical repairs to the plant.

Our first stop was the Headworks — another of the funny euphemisms — which separates out the grit and rags that cannot be treated. Buffington explained that baby wipes just won't break down.

From there we followed the path of the sewage to the primary treatment tanks, where the water is slowed to let the solids fall to the bottom "You'll get a blanket of about two to three feet at the bottom," explained Buffington.

Next was secondary treatment, where the water is aerated and bacteria is encouraged to eat the remaining solids. The buses pulled slowly past huge machines that supply air, the biggest demand for power.

Finally were the filters that make the effluent clean enough for recycling or release. The plant uses chlorine but removes it chemically before water goes into the bay.

We didn't see everything. Underground is a maze of tunnels that allow mechanics access to repair equipment. (Buffington explained that these were serviced using motorized vehicles known as chariots until a couple of less-than-careful employees suffered a nasty accident).

And no, the San Jose sewage plant doesn't compare with the Paris sewers, which you can visit on boats that take you through a cross-section of the storied city's past.

You can make the case, however, that the San Jose sewage plant tour, which was discontinued for five years after 9/11, serves a vital public relations interest.

Because much of the equipment is 30 or 40 years old, the city is embarked on an aggressive program to upgrade it. After a long period of no growth, sewage rates are rising significantly (This year, they will go up by 15 percent to roughly \$27 month per residence).

Is it worth the money? Well, take the "Wonders of Our Waterworks" tour (email: planttours@sanjoseca.gov) and you'll have a better idea. All cost aside, I know I'll never think of baby wipes the same way again.