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## Sewage plant modernization opens up more than 2000 acres near bay-front

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It's not every day that huge parcels of open land in Silicon Valley become available for new uses, particularly near the bay.

But San Jose is dreaming of ways to reshape much of the city's waterfront by turning nearly 2,600 acres — a property four times the size of the San Jose's downtown — into everything from sports fields to restaurants and retail shops, hiking trails to clean-tech factories.

The only catch? It's next to a sewage plant.

But a \$1 billion proposal to modernize San Jose's aging sewage treatment plant could eliminate the odors that make it an unappetizing neighbor.

When the plant, located between Alviso and Milpitas, was built in 1956 to help treat the rotting cannery wastes that were fouling San Francisco Bay, then-San Jose City Manager A.P. "Dutch" Hamann made sure there was a big buffer zone. The reason was in part to allow the plant to expand as the city grew, but mostly to avoid complaints over smells.

Today only about 180 acres of the property is used by the plant, a collection of tanks, pipes and filters

that treats 110 million gallons of sewage a day to some of the cleanest standards in the nation. But as part of the upgrade, modern equipment would be installed to enclose tanks and other facilities, filtering out smells and negating the need for a big land buffer, plant officials say.

"The plant does a great job of treating wastewater. But most of the equipment is old," said John Stufflebean, San Jose's Environmental Services director. "You wouldn't buy a 1972 Pontiac today, even if it was well-maintained. At some point it makes more sense to get something new rather than replacing old equipment."

A telephone survey last August of 1,200 Silicon Valley residents by the city Environmental Services Department found large majorities want the property to be turned into a park, with commercial development opposed by 65 percent of people.

Stufflebean said the city hopes to allow some commercial development on the land, which lies off Highway 237 and Zanker Road, to offset the \$1 billion cost. No housing would be allowed, he said. But he envisions some retail shops, and perhaps industrial sites where green technology companies could thrive.

Last year, the city worked out a deal with Tesla, the San Carlos electric carmaker, to lease 100 acres of the plant's land for a factory. But when Tesla's funding fell short, the deal fell apart.

The city also could use much of the land for baseball or soccer fields, and hiking trails, and could restore a former 860-acre Cargill Salt pond it owns there, known as "A-18," back to wetlands for ducks, fish and other wildlife, Stufflebean added.

Bob Power, executive director of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, said roughly 30 acres of

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the sewage plant property is home to the burrowing owl, a beleaguered animal that has lost habitat all over the Bay Area. He favored some development for green industry, but leaned against sports fields.

"As much of it as can be preserved as open space should be, and people should be given access to the salt ponds," Power said. "With all the nesting shorebirds and wading birds, and the massive flocks of ducks and terns and gulls in the wintertime, it is a phenomenal resource."

The plant treats wastewater from 1.4 million residents of San Jose and Santa Clara, which jointly own it; along with Milpitas, Campbell, Cupertino, Los Gatos, Saratoga and Monte Sereno.

For years, Milpitas residents have complained about smells from giant lagoons on 770 acres of the site where sludge, a byproduct after the water is treated to near-drinkable standards and released into the bay, dries for before going to Newby Island Landfill in Milpitas.

Milpitas Mayor Bob Livengood said he'd like to see some development on the site to reduce the hit to ratepayers' sewer bills, which now average about \$30 a month.

"I'd hate to see a situation where none of the land was developed and the rates went up another 50 or 80 or 100 percent," he said. "Why not soften the blow a little bit?"

Livengood said he is interested in new technology that could negate the need for the sludge drying beds, and instead dry the sludge faster in 100 acres of greenhouses where smells are captured.

Meanwhile, as population grows, the plant won't need to expand capacity much because of water conservation efforts, but it will need to be retrofitted

to handle higher concentrations of waste.

Raw sewage can cause outbreaks of cholera, typhoid or dysentery. San Jose built its first sewers in 1871, moving sewage from downtown into the bay through clay and brick pipes.

"The bay used to change colors based on the canning season. It was yellow when there were peaches and purple when there were plums. Rats would go up the sewers. It was a major public health hazard," said Kirsten Struve, project manager for the wastewater plant plan.

State health officials ordered San Jose to stop the pollution, and city voters approved bonds in 1950 to build the plant. Today, it treats waste to tertiary levels, removing 99 percent of the impurities. About 10 percent of the wastewater is recycled, to irrigate landscaping.

The city has begun hosting regular weekly tours, taking the public on two-hour free excursions where visitors learn about the intricacies of sewage — from sludge-drying to microbe digestion — and are asked what uses they'd like to see for the land.

City officials say the tours will continue through October, and a draft plan will come out next spring, listing options and costs, with a final plan due in 2011.

After a plant tour Thursday, San Jose retiree Rod LeValley said he'd like to see sports fields and parks on the soon-to-be available land.

"We don't need anymore shopping centers," he said. "And I don't think most people would come to a restaurant out here."

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