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San Jose wastewater plant overhaul to open up baylands property

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Imagine a piece of Bayfront property more than twice the size of San Francisco's Golden Gate Park — an expanse of marshland and open space that is essentially undeveloped in 2010.

That land exists as buffer space for the San Jose/Santa Clara Water Pollution Control Plant, and because that plant is due for a \$1.5 billion overhaul and equipment consolidation, roughly 2,200 acres are expected to be opened for new uses in the next 10 years.

City leaders are half way through a three-year process to decide what to do with the land and how to pay for the overhaul, and advisory group meetings are scheduled for January with larger public meetings in the spring.

"We're looking for things that will be compatible with the environment and the plant itself, like clean-tech companies that could use byproducts of the plant," said Jennifer Garnett, a spokeswoman for the San Jose Environmental Services department.

"Going through this planning process allows us to think broadly," Garnett said.

Most San Jose residents don't think about what happens to water after it drains down a shower or toilet, but it ends up in a system of pipes that flow to the and into San Francisco Bay.

Built in 1956, the site at 700 Los Esteros Road is roughly 2 miles by 2 miles at the southern end of San Francisco Bay near Alviso.

It handles an average of 110 million gallons of sewer water every day into that is pumped into a system of filters and ponds to separate solids from liquids and purify the water. It churns out water that is 99 percent free of impurities before it flows to the bay, and it also pumps out recycled water for irrigation and other uses in a "purple pipe" network.

With one more step, it could produce drinking water.

A three-year rate hike initiated in 2007 is paying for the first \$250 million of urgent repairs, and city planners have been discussing how to pay for the remainder — potentially by increasing sewer rates, floating bonds, leasing land or forging corporate partnerships.

Some of the drying ponds and other equipment are likely to be removed from the plant in the next 10 years, so roughly 2,200 acres will be available. San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, for comparison, is 1,017 acres.

In meetings in 2009, there was talk of creating a demonstration wetland, a wildlife museum, sports fields, owl habitat, commercial development, or some combination.

City environmental services officials also are expected in April to make a recommendation to the

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city council about further sewer rate increases.

For more information on the project, visit www.sanjoseca.gov/esd/plan tmaster plan.

Homeowners in San Jose now pay \$31 per month in sewer fees that are tacked on to property tax bills, and apartment building owners pay \$17.73 per unit. To raise the fee, state law says, requires ratepayers to be notified by mail. If more than 50 percent of ratepayers mail in letters indicating they are opposed to the fee hike, it can be blocked.

Officials say that if a rate increase were proposed, it probably would be introduced as a multiyear package to give ratepayers time to plan.

Some ratepayers might balk at the fee hike with such a weak economy, just as the plant's creation faced challenges in the 1940s.

Before wastewater plants were built in cities like San Jose in the mid-20th century, sewage was simply collected in pipes and dumped in to the nearest body of water untreated — in this case, waterways like Coyote Creek and the Guadalupe River.

As sewage rotted in Alviso year after year, a 1946 federal law and a 1949 state law spurred the creation of the San Jose plant. Later in 1949, San Jose leaders initiated a bond measure to fund it.

Leaders from San Jose's 22 fruit and vegetable canneries — the city's largest employers — successfully opposed the measure, saying the new fees would cost jobs. In 1950, leaders from the canneries — caved, realizing that government fines against the city would cost it more in the long run than building the plant.

Today, the plant serves 1.4 million residents in 10 cities and sanitation districts.

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