

The Mercury News

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Photos tell story of San Jose's waste water treatment plant

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Posted: 09/17/2010 04:29:40 PM PDT

Updated: 09/18/2010 06:09:29 PM PDT

Some people cringe when nationally renowned environmental photographer Robert Dawson tells them where he's been working for much of the last year: San Jose's sewage treatment plant.

As the plant's first photographer-in-residence, Dawson spent his days studying and capturing images of the plant's workers, operations and surroundings. The goal: to educate the public about the plant's importance as it enters a \$1.5 billion renovation.

"I've been interested in water for years," said Dawson, 60. "I think of it as a part of our shared process -- something we have in common that we depend on. It's pretty fundamental and basic. It's like the air we breathe."

The San Jose/Santa Clara Water Pollution Control Plant is one of the largest such facilities in California. It treats and cleans the wastewater of more than 1.5 million people who live and work in the 300-square-mile area encompassing San Jose, Santa Clara, Milpitas, Campbell, Cupertino, Los Gatos, Saratoga and Monte Sereno.

It has also, as plant officials note, allowed for the economic growth of the region. Partly designed to treat the massive amount of wastewater from canneries in the area when it was built in 1956, the plant has expanded through the years to allow for the rise of Silicon Valley.

"Having this incredible piece of infrastructure allowed our city to grow the way it did," said Barbara Goldstein, director of the city's public art program. "Having a photographer in

residence actually document the work there and the outcome of seeing clean water restored to the bay is a very important story to tell."

Matt Krupp, project planner for the plant's master plan, agreed.

"We provide a very valuable service to the community, and a lot of people don't really know what happens out here," he said.

The results of Dawson's project are dozens of compelling photographs now on display -- some at the City Windows Gallery at City Hall, others at the city's downtown Dr. Martin Luther King Library and still others to be mounted at the plant itself. A website and book are in the works.

Dawson, who also is a photography instructor at San Jose State and Stanford universities, has spent his career documenting and studying the water of the Western United States.

"I tend to bring a lot of background information about the subject, the broader subject of water in general," Dawson explained. "I think that's why they hired me -- not just to illustrate but interpret."

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Dawson said he worried at first that he would run out of scenes and subjects to photograph, but he was surprised daily by the plant's complexity.

He also witnessed the stress shouldered by the plant's workers.

"It's eye-opening," said Dawson. "A lot of these people are working in jobs where you can't mess up. "... They've got to be on top of their game to make sure it all works."

The photography project, which cost \$65,000, is part of the city's public art ordinance, which sets aside one percent of all eligible capital improvement projects for public art. The city has 200 such public art pieces in its collection, many of them at libraries and community centers.

The plant's renovation, which is expected to be completed over the next 15 years, will be paid for by ratepayers.

Two other public art projects have been budgeted for the water treatment plant: one for \$120,000 over five years to develop a master public art plan for the site, which 2,000 people visit every year. Another project, budgeted for \$175,000, will go to interpretive art installations related to the plant. All three artists were selected through a bid process.

Dawson's display at the City Windows Gallery, along Fourth Street between Santa Clara and San Fernando streets, is called "Conscience of the City." It's also the title of Dawson's upcoming book, and it's taken from a passage in Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables":

"The sewer is the conscience of the city. Everything there converges and confronts everything else. In that livid spot there are shades, but there are no

longer any secrets "... sewer is a cynic. It tells everything."

As an example, Dawson cited containers at the plant filled with such recovered items as torn-up \$20 and \$100 bills, drivers licenses and immigration cards. It's as if the people who discarded the items wanted to leave their pasts behind, he said.

Ironically, that's not what happens.

"People think once it goes down the toilet, that's it," Dawson said of the beginning of the sewage process. "But they never think it comes out somewhere else."

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