



City of Morro Bay
595 Harbor Street
Morro Bay, CA 93442
(805) 772-6200
Online: morro-bay.ca.us

A VIEW FROM HARBOR STREET

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Big WRF Stuff: Important Process, Progress and Decisions

By David Buckingham, City Manager



The City's new Water Reclamation Facility project is a huge and important effort. Are we making progress? Are there big decisions to be made? Is your voice important? Yes, yes and yes! Here's a quick update on the City's Water Reclamation Facility (WRF) project and how you can be involved.

While no dirt has yet been moved, the City continues to make significant progress on the major project to move our 62-year-old Waste Water Treatment Plant (WWTP) off the oceanfront floodplain from which it dumps nearly 1 million gallons of treated water in the ocean each day. With all of our Fiscal Year 15/16 goals nearly complete, Phase 1 of the new Water Reclamation Facility (WRF) remains on track to begin operations in February 2021.

What's been accomplished this year? With robust public input and expert advice from our Water Reclamation Facility Citizens Advisory Committee (WRFCAC) at every step, an expert Program Management Team is integrated into the City staff and helping guide the project. Our Facility Master Planning team is on board and has completed preparatory analysis, and our Environmental Review team has likewise been selected and is evaluating sites in the Morro Valley.

Perhaps most important, fatal flaws analysis is complete and two Morro Valley sites, Rancho Colina and the Righetti Ranch, have both been determined to be feasible from geotechnical, biological and historical resource perspectives.

All that said, the City has a major decision coming up and deeply values our residents' input. While for a period the proposed Rancho Colina site for the new WRF appeared to be most desirable, a number of factors are now pointing us to seriously consider changing our preferred location to the "Righetti Ranch." Staff presented the technical pros and cons to both the WRFCAC and City Council in the past month, and we are all now seeking public input to inform this decision.

In late January the City was able to secure an option to purchase the Righetti Ranch and, should the Council determine that property to be the preferred site, has 1 ½ years to complete

the essential environmental review before making a final purchase. While negotiations with the Rancho Colina property owner remain friendly and thoughtful, the parties have not been able to reach consensus on critical criteria for a possible purchase.

With either location, the City Council's stated goals for the project, and the engineering work completed to date, make it clear the new facility will be nothing like the existing plant with its open-air trickling filters, sludge drying beds and obvious industrial character. We are replacing that half-century-old technology with what is planned to be a completely contained, indoor facility with robust odor control that treats wastewater, at minimum, to tertiary treatment standards and will be designed and landscaped to fit the character of a semi-rural, coastal-zone location. In addition to cost, environmental factors and future use of reclaimed water, odor-control, visual compatibility, and traffic/access are all critical concerns for the new WRF.

As the City prepares to make a decision on whether to shift our focus to the Righetti site, we are committed both to providing great information to the community, and then to listening to community input in the decision-making process.

On Thursday evening, Feb. 25, the City will host a neighborhood workshop to provide updated and accurate information about the WRF project in general, and possible Righetti property site selection in particular. The workshop will be in the Morro Bay Community Center, 1001 Kennedy Way, at 6:30 p.m.

While the purpose of the neighborhood workshop is primarily education, the City also looks forward to robust public input into the Righetti site decision. The WRFCAC will be considering this decision in more detail at its March 1 meeting at 3 p.m. in Vet's Hall. City Council members will then consider the WRFCAC recommendation during their regularly scheduled 6 p.m. meeting on March 8, also in Vet's Hall.

The City has already conducted a tremendous amount of public outreach on the details of the project in general, including two workshops focusing both on technology and compatible design. Those workshops are available for viewing on the City's YouTube channel – simply search "Morro Bay WRF" from YouTube. Further, all staff reports for WRFCAC and Council meetings, and technical data, is available online at morrobayca.gov/wrf.

We look forward to providing great info to the community, and hearing from you! Attend the Neighborhood Workshop on February 25, then provide your input at the March 1 WRFCAC meeting, the March 8 City Council meeting, or send me an email at dbuckingham@morrobayca.gov.

Note: This editorial also appears in the February 24 edition of the Bay News.