

WATSONVILLE  
Planning  
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# Bit of ash lands in city's sewer plan

By STEVE STROTH  
STAFF WRITER

Watsonville city officials are worried that a mistake they made in accepting construction bids may have set their plans for a \$24 million sewer plant expansion back four months and might even end up costing them more money.

Public Works staffers are still hoping U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officials will overlook a "technicality" which state officials say could constitute an unfair bidding process.

If the EPA ignores that flaw, the project could proceed on schedule and construction work could begin later this month.

But state water officials, who happen to hold the purse strings to millions in government grants for the project, are withholding approval of the contractor's plans because of what they termed a bidding flaw, Assistant Public Works Director Dave Koch said Friday.

If the city's process is deemed unfair by EPA, it could mean state officials will make the city re-bid the project, Koch said.

That would take at least a month, and would delay the construction start by four months — which would further set back the work by limiting the amount that could be done before the onset of the rainy season, Koch said.

A new bid process could also result in a higher low bid than the \$24 million Fru-Con Corp. agreed to last month. That means a higher cost to the city.

In order to proceed with the plant expansion on schedule, city officials must get approval from EPA and California Water Resources Control Board officials who have examined the Fru-Con bid. City public works staffers chose the bid last month, but the City Council can't officially award the contract or allow work to begin until state and EPA officials approve it, Koch said.

Koch still hopes to bring the contract up for City Council approval at the Aug. 13 meeting.

Water board staffers held up the process when they noticed a "technical type of problem," State Board Water Engineer John Blubaugh said this morning.

The city was too strict with its specifications for the concrete that will be used on the project, he said.

In its bid description, the city required bidders to allow only a certain amount and type of fly ash — a burned waste product used to cheaply mix with cement — in the concrete for the project.

State officials said this minimum requirement may have prevented firms other than Fru-Con from making the lowest bid

by using more fly ash than the city would allow.

"But that's ridiculous because there was a \$400,000 difference between Fru-Con and the nearest bidder," Koch said. "We're talking about \$10,000 of fly ash compared to a \$24 million project. You can imagine how I feel about this."

"We felt the restrictions were so restrictive as to eliminate the use of fly ash," Blubaugh said. The city required a type of fly ash and a concentration that was more expensive than cement, he said.

That wouldn't be so bad, but federal law requires these types of projects to use reclaimed material such as fly ash, Blubaugh said.

Fru-Con doesn't propose to use any, Koch said.

"We don't want to delay the project if we can help it, but we don't want to violate any federal laws either," he said.

Since several EPA officials have been on vacation, clearing the project with them hasn't been possible, Blubaugh said. But he said he expects to resolve the problem this week.

"We have to think at this point that EPA is going to be reasonable and let us award this contract," Koch said. "That's what we're expecting."

Blubaugh was also optimistic.

He guessed that EPA officials would scold the engineers who

designed the project, and then allow the construction contract to be awarded.

"Those restrictions are the only problem that we have that would prevent the (bid) award," Blubaugh said.

"Our main concern is clean water, but we're also concerned about this congressional act (which requires use of fly ash)," he said. "In this case, we just want to have EPA's blessing before we pass the bid award back to Watsonville."