

MTBE-tainted water won't hook into city sewers

By JONDI GUMZ

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

A new system to pump and treat groundwater contaminated with the gas additive MTBE sailed by the City Council on Wednesday night after the oil companies footing the bill decided not to hook into the city sewers.

Instead, the oil companies will seek a state permit to discharge the treated water into a stream that eventually flows into the bay. In

**SCOTTS
VALLEY**

July, the new treatment system was blocked by city planning commissioners who questioned whether the groundwater would be treated to a safe enough level. With the burden on the state to monitor the treatment, the council swiftly voted for it, 5-0.

"It's not on their watch," said Keith Casto, a San Francisco attorney representing Shell, the oil company serving as spokesman on the cleanup.

Karen Petryna, an engineer with Shell, said the fees for connecting to the city's wastewater treatment plant were "prohibitively expensive" in light of the tiny amount of MTBE and TBA,

a treatment byproduct, that the city would accept. Both chemicals are suspected of causing cancer.

Casto said it would be more cost effective to go through the permit process with the state Regional Water Quality Control Board than get city approval.

"When they saw the level (of reduction in contamination) that we were expecting, and the connection fee, they did the math," said city planner Jackie Young.

Shell spokesman Cameron Smyth said the company wanted to do whatever was necessary to get the permit to start the new treatment system.

MTBE was found in the well serving residents of Manana Woods four years ago. A system has been installed by the oil companies to treat the water to meet state requirements. Engineers say the private well has prevented contamination from reaching a city well farther down on Mount Hermon Road.

Sue Roth, president of the Manana Woods Mutual Water Co., urged city officials to give their approval so the stepped-up treatment can

begin. The water will be pumped underground outside Walgreens on Mount Hermon Road, where MTBE contamination has been unusually high, and treated with carbon filters and microbes to break down the chemical. The earliest the system can start is Nov. 1. That's when the state board will hear the request.

Shell plans to go ahead and build the system, which is expected to take two months, so it will be ready to operate as soon as the state approves.

The oil companies, under order from the state to do more to prevent MTBE contamination from reaching wells serving city residents, changed their stance a day before the council met.

When they sought the city permit two months ago, they thought the state requirements would be more stringent than the city's. But it turned out the requirements set by Scott Hamby, who oversees the wastewater treatment plant, were tougher.

Contact Jondi Gumz at
jgumz@santa-cruz.com.