

Watsonville optimistic on sewer-plant reprieve

By JAMIE MARKS

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WATSONVILLE — City officials are cautiously optimistic they won't be required to further upgrade the city's sewage-treatment plant for the next five years.

If the state Water Resources Control Board grants a waiver next month, it will save the city more than \$10 million in further refinements to the sewage-treatment plant.

Assistant Public Works Director David Koch attended a workshop of the Water Resources Control Board in Sacramento last week, in which the city's waiver was under discussion.

"They were just meeting as a workshop, so no decision was made," Koch said. "But we got a favorable reaction. Based on the kinds of questions they were asking, I don't anticipate any problem in getting the waiver."

A decision by the state is expected next month.

The waiver is valid for five years. If granted, it will exempt the city from having to move immediately

into "secondary" treatment, a more complex and costly form of treating sewage than what the plant now does, and one which is required by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Several groups, including Friends of the Sea Otter and the State Department of Fish and Game, appealed a decision by the state a year ago granting the city the tentative waiver.

The city last year finished upgrading the plant to "advanced primary" treatment levels, and extended the ocean outfall line into Monterey Bay.

Most of the \$23 million cost was covered by federal grants, which are unavailable to bring a plant to secondary treatment.

The city will have to finance upgrading the plant to secondary levels if it decides to move in that direction. That could cost \$10 million or more, which likely would be paid by taxpayers.

Koch said the revamped plant is already "surpassing the requirements for secondary treatment" on suspended solids, which are the primary concern of environmental

groups.

Suspended solids are removed from the water discharged into the bay by sophisticated filters in the plant.

"We're also meeting the highest disinfection standard of any plant in the bay," Koch said. The standard measures the amount of bacteriological matter that ends up in the bay.

Koch said the city has nine months of data by which to judge the plant's efficiency, he said.

One reason Watsonville's plant has already met the secondary treatment level for suspended solids is that the vast majority of water processed at the plant is vegetable rinse water from the Pajaro Valley's frozen-food firms.

Monterey Regional treatment plant and Santa Cruz's plant process a much higher amount of raw sewage, according to Koch.

Although the city's plant has already met some of the secondary treatment levels, it still hasn't reached the higher treatment level in other areas, so the plant can't be considered fully operational at secondary treatment.