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Species

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Rare salamander strikes again

Amphibian threatens city's landfill expansion

By CHELA ZABIN
STAFF WRITER

The Santa Cruz long-toed salamander is throwing its weight around again.

The rare amphibian, which has held up many a project in Santa Cruz County, may make its home on a site Watsonville wants to use for an expansion of its landfill off San Andreas Road. Last winter and spring, the Scotts Valley-based Habitat Restoration Group searched the area for evidence of the salamander, but the low rainfall, which can affect the creature's habits, rendered the study inconclusive. So, biologists will pray for rain and carry out another study this winter and coming spring.

If the salamander is found, the permit for the new landfill, which is on county property, will have to go back to the Board of Supervisors for reconsideration. David Koch, the city's utilities director, said he wasn't sure what will happen if the study is rendered inconclusive again because of another dry winter.

In the meantime, however, the city is running out of room at its current landfill. City staffers think it'll be full by next fall. Even if no salamanders are found, the extra

time needed for the study could mean the old landfill will be full before the new one is ready.

As an interim measure, the City Council Tuesday night gave its approval to the use of an alternate site — a portion of the current landfill now used for sludge — that could be converted for general landfill use. The council approved \$285,050 for design plans for the sludge area.

The city actually had been planning to convert the sludge area and had already budgeted the money for it, but wasn't expecting to have to do it until 1996.

In other action, the council:

- Approved a donation of \$500 to the Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic in memory of the late Bill Graham. Graham, a rock music promoter, organized a benefit concert for victims of the October 1989 earthquake and donated some of his own money to Watsonville and to St. Patrick's Church.

- Approved a joint meeting with the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors and the Scotts Valley City Council to talk about the possibility of a joint "materials recovery facility." The facility would separate trash into its recyclable

and compostable components in an attempt to divert as much as possible from going into local landfills.

A study carried out on such a MRF, as it's called, estimates it would cost nearly \$60 million to build and \$17 million to operate each year. Watsonville staff estimates garbage fees would have to double to cover the city's portion of the MRF and has urged the council to look at other options before committing to such a costly venture. The meeting will be held Nov. 19 at 7:30 p.m. in the Board of Supervisors' chambers.

- Approved membership in a committee to look into traffic impact fees the city wants to charge developers on the west side to build a bridge over Watsonville Slough. The city has been planning to build the bridge for several years and the cost has risen steadily to close to \$3 million.

Committee members are Norman Schwartz, Dick Bernard, John Fry, Dick Peterson, Chuck Allen, Bob Dwyer, Gail Roche, Stan Nielsen, Oscar Rios and Al Alcalá.

Councilwoman Betty Murphy said she was concerned that several of the committee members

are landowners who would have to pay the fees. But several other council members said the committee was advisory only and that their recommendations would have to be weighed against what city staff thought was needed and possible to do.

- Came to agreement with three of the city's employee bargaining units. The council approved memorandums of understanding with the International Association of Firefighters union Local 1172 and the Confidential Unit, which represents the secretarial staff, and the management group.

Firefighters got a 3 percent raise and another step added to top of the pay scale effective next year. The Confidential unit got a 4 percent raise and another pay scale step effective in July 1993. The Management unit received a 4½ percent increase retroactive to July 1, and another 4 percent increase in July 1992.

Several matters regarding overtime, holiday pay, educational incentives, bilingual pay and retirement benefits were worked out, and the city has agreed to keep its current health insurance benefits in place.