

City's hopeful Panetta's clout will pay off

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The concern at Watsonville City Hall over lost funding for the sewage-treatment plant and the threat of higher sewer bills for local residents could all disappear if Congressman Leon Panetta can convince his fellow legislators that the city qualifies for a federal funding program that no longer exists.

Panetta, D-Carmel Valley, wrote a letter this week to the chairman of the House subcommittee on water resources, calling for the "grandfathering" of funding for treatment-plant projects in Watsonville and Santa Cruz, which are now scheduled to lose 20 percent of the federal funding they'd planned on because of bureaucratic delays and a change in funding laws.

Panetta asked that the treatment-plant projects in both cities receive federal funding for 75 percent of their total project costs, rather than the 55 percent set in the current law.

In his letter to Rep. Robert Roe, D-New Jersey, Panetta

said both projects "clearly meet Congress' intent with regard to federal funding of segmented projects."

Both cities are involved in multimillion-dollar, multi-phased projects aimed at upgrading the capacity and treatment level of their plants.

But plans for those projects, which were completed before the changes in the federal-funding law went into effect, were not processed in time by state officials administering the federal funds. For that reason, officials in both cities are trying to convince federal legislators that their projects should be penned into the old law retroactively — called grandfathering — so that they receive the 75 percent funding.

To do that, Congress must grant the funding for the two projects in a Clean Water Act bill scheduled for review by a joint House and Senate committee.

Without the funding, the cities would have to make up several million dollars on their own by raising sewer rates to their customers.