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New recycling plant in works

Watsonville worried about \$60 million cost

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Watsonville's participation in a \$60-million plant that would recycle about 85 percent of the garbage it collects will be discussed at a meeting of the Watsonville and Scotts Valley city councils and the county Board of Supervisors tomorrow night.

Watsonville city staff and council members have expressed hesitation about participating in the "materials recovery facility" because of the expense. In addition to the \$60 million construction cost, it would take about \$17 million to run the plant each year.

The city's share of that would be between \$3 million and \$4 million, Utilities Director David Koch told the council last week. The city now collects about \$3.2 million a year in garbage fees. To pay for the new plant, Koch said, the city would have to double its garbage-collection rates.

The meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m. in the Board of Supervisors' chambers in the County Governmental Center in Santa Cruz.

No one on Watsonville's council objects to the reason for such a plant. Local landfills are reaching

capacity and a new state law requires that 50 percent of all waste that would normally go to landfills be recycled or otherwise diverted by 2000. Unfortunately, as with many attempts to do what's right by the environment, there's a law of diminishing returns.

"For every incremental 1 percent (diverted), the price goes up," Koch said.

Koch said 85 percent is "a very high diversion rate" and suggested the city might want to go for something less ambitious.

"A facility like this makes sense," he said, "but there should be an economy of size."

The proposed materials-recovery facility is discussed in a report compiled by R.W. Beck and Associates, of San Jose, and paid for by the city and the county. The city agreed to participate in the study as one of the permit conditions of its new landfill, which is on county property.

The plant operates on a "four-sort" system. Customers would sort their garbage into four components: two dry and two wet. The dry categories would be all paper goods (except bathroom waste and

paper with food waste on it) and other dry waste. The wet categories would be yard waste and all other wet waste.

Garbage would be picked up by two trucks — one for each category. Koch said Watsonville would have to change its garbage-collection system, which would cost about another \$1 million.

The plant itself is proposed for a 70-acre parcel at Buena Vista Road and Harkins Slough Road near the county landfill. The plant is expected to take in 500 tons of waste per day, and would accept everything but asphalt and concrete.

The technology itself is simple, Koch said. The plant would contain an "in-vessel" or internal composting system to break down the wet waste. The yard waste would be composted outside. The rest would be sorted into various recyclable categories by a work force of 250 people, working two shifts. Once sorted, it would be packaged and sent out to whomever is buying it.

The actual cost of running the plant is estimated to be \$22 million per year, but the report estimates that the recyclables could gener-

ate \$5 million in revenues, reducing the cost to \$17 million. Koch said the report may be slightly optimistic in how much it thinks could be sold. He also warned the council that the plant may compete with existing recycling companies.

Koch said the proposed site will be expensive to develop. It is steep and would require extensive grading. Sewer and water lines would have to be extended to it and the roads may be inadequate for the amount of traffic it would generate. Koch reminded the council, however, that an environmental impact report for the project would look at other possible sites.

County staff wants to continue the planning process, he said, looking at design options, working out the details of the collection system and who would own and control the plant, and examining the recyclables market more carefully.

He said the county wants to begin working on the environmental impact report in January, with an eye toward beginning construction in January 1994.