

Watsonville gets good news on plea for sewage waiver

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The city of Watsonville has won tentative approval of its request for a variance from strict federal requirements for treating sewage.

City officials announced yesterday that the Environmental Protection Agency has granted tentative approval of the waiver sought by the city for the past eight years.

The city is now expanding its sewage-treatment plant to provide "advanced primary" treatment. The federal Clean Water Act requires a higher level of treatment, called "secondary treatment," which would cost the city a lot more to build. Although the city has received substantial funding from the state and federal governments to expand to advanced primary treatment, such aid would probably not be available for secondary treatment.

The federal law includes a provision for five-year waivers from the secondary-treatment

requirement for certain cities.

The city first applied for the waiver in 1979. By the time the EPA ruled on that application in 1985, the information the city had provided was outdated, and the waiver was denied.

The city was given a year to revise its application, and did so, submitting it in May of last year.

But the EPA's tentative approval does not mean the city's fight for a waiver is over.

At least two public hearings will be held — one by the EPA, and one to be held jointly by the EPA and the Regional Water Quality Control Board.

The city can expect stiff opposition to the waiver at these hearings. Environmental groups have mobilized against these waivers — such concerted opposition was a factor in the city of Santa Cruz's recent decision to abandon its efforts for a waiver of secondary treatment.

Watsonville's waiver must be approved by the Regional Water Quality Control Board. That board's decision may be

appealed to the State Water Resources Control Board.

Assistant Public Works Director David Koch estimated the entire hearings and appeal process will take until January 1988.

Even if the waiver is approved after all the hearings, it is good for only five years. Koch said the City Council would have to consider whether it would upgrade its sewer plant to secondary treatment when the waiver expires, or whether it would try to get another waiver.

"In any event, it will be much easier in five years to go to secondary treatment," Koch said, "than to suddenly right now issue \$12 million in bonds to go to secondary."

The five-year waiver will give the city a chance to accumulate money collected from sewer rate-payers to pay for secondary treatment, he said.

Another advantage to the five-year delay before expanding to secondary treatment, Koch said, is that it would give the city a chance to evaluate the effectiveness of the newly expanded plant. When it is clear how well the expanded plant works, it will be easier to design further expansion, Koch said.