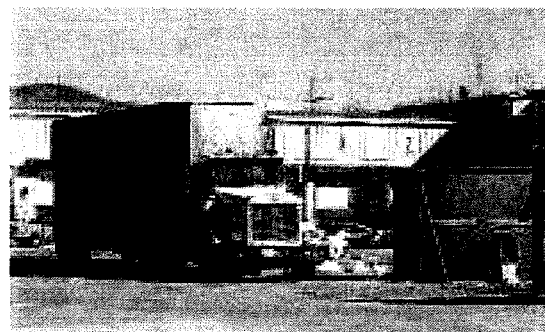


Garbage-processing plans scaled back

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After planning for more than three years to build a garbage processing center in the heart of Salinas, the Salinas Valley Solid Waste Authority is moving toward other alternatives.

Last week, the agency's board of directors approved a plan that would explore expanding the Sun Street transfer station to process 400 tons of garbage a day, a considerably scaled down version from the original proposal of 1,500 tons a day. As part of the plan, the agency will also consider another garbage processing center at the Johnson Canyon landfill near Gonzales.

The move came after months of lobbying by the Salinas United Business Association, one of several groups working on sprucing up the city's image, because its members were afraid the garbage processing facility would lower property values and would be an all-around detriment to the area. "It's a really important development," said Victor Mehia, SUBA's executive director. "One of the problems we were most concerned with was the traffic. There was going to be 1,500 tons per day, and if that's going to be reduced to 400 tons, we'd be interested in knowing what kind of facility they are going to build."

That question will not be answered until after a consultant comes back with an evaluation of the alternative project, said Jose Gamboa, operations manager for the Salinas Valley Solid Waste Authority. "We have to first engage in a conversation to find out what are the steps we need to undertake," he said. "We're looking at the scaled-back project. Right now, we have a permit for 100 tons per day in the city ... but we want to look at 400. We still have to work with the city to see how feasible that project would be."

As part of its plan to reduce the garbage that ends in the county's dumps, the Solid Waste Authority has been looking into expanding the Sun Street transfer station, a 6.75-acre site, into a full-fledged recycling plant.

But the site the authority purchased more than three years ago inconveniently abuts the SUBA improvement district, an area merchants are trying to clean up. When they found out about the authority's plans, they made their displeasure known.

Some members of the Solid Waste Authority, made up of officials from all the Valley cities and the Monterey County government, feel Salinas leaders have changed their minds about future uses for the land where the transfer station sits. "I don't get the indication that the city has a long future in mind for a transfer station," said Supervisor Lou Calcagno, vice president of the board. "If the city of Salinas has some plans for that area, the quicker we know it the better it's going to be and we can look at other sites."

Administrators with the Solid Waste Authority are charged with finding alternatives to dispose of the Valley's waste. They set up as one of their goals to reduce by 75 percent the amount of trash that lands in the dumps by 2015. So far, their efforts have been stymied by property owners or neighbors who refuse to allow their surroundings to become dumping grounds. A proposal to build another landfill near San Lucas was stopped after a local outcry, and the Sun Street Transfer project may now be headed in a similar direction.

Expanding the Sun Street site is become imperative with the impending closure of the area's landfills. "When Crazy Horse closes the end of this year, we'll need a spot to (sort out) garbage," Calcagno said.

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Tests planned at old landfill

The dump at Laguna Seca has been closed for more than 40 years

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State engineers this week will install monitoring probes in the former Laguna Seca landfill to determine if it is emitting methane gas 40 years after its closure.

The results of those tests will help establish the county's final landfill buffer zone policy, which could be a model for other counties throughout the state, said John Ramirez, assistant director of the county environmental health division.

Ramirez said the state Integrated Waste Management Authority honed in on Laguna Seca after learning of Monterey County's plans to establish buffer zones, which would restrict residential development near landfills. He said it is particularly interested in that closed landfill because homes have been built close to or beyond the old property line.

The site straddles South Boundary Road, York Road and Estrella Avenue above the Laguna Seca Golf Ranch. The county has proposed a buffer zone that would limit new residential construction within 1,000 feet of the area used for refuse. Buffers of 1,000 feet or 2,500 feet have been proposed for all of the county's 21 landfills, only four of which are still operating.

New home construction within the zones will be allowed only if there is no alternative building site on the property, there is no detected contamination and sensors are installed.

In the case of Laguna Seca, dozens of homes have already been built within that proposed buffer zone. The state and county are not considering condemning those homes, but want to make sure the residents are safe.

Ramirez said one home has been approved for construction near Laguna Seca since the buffer zone was proposed. The owners were required to include methane sensors in their plans.

State law requires landfill owners to monitor for dangerous off-gassing for 30 years after a landfill is closed. Ramirez said officials want to test Laguna Seca, which closed in 1966, to ensure that three decades is a sufficient period for testing. If methane is detected, he said, the county's buffer policy could extend that 30-year period.

Matt Fore of the county's environmental health division said the testing could be completed within a month.

Monterey County and the Salinas Valley Solid Waste Authority began planning the buffer zones in the late 1990s in response to litigation by North County property owners who claimed contamination at the now-closed Lewis Road landfill.

It was not until May, however, that affected property owners were notified of the plan. Ramirez has said that it was coincidence that the plan was announced after residents along Pesante Road filed a lawsuit against Bridgestone Firestone North American Tire LLC alleging injury by contamination in their water and air from illegal dumping at Crazy Horse Landfill.

The notices of the proposed buffer zones sparked outrage among some property owners whose ability to develop their land would be restricted. The county environmental health division planned to present a series of workshops this fall to explain the proposal and answer residents' questions.

Ramirez said those workshops have been put off until later this winter so that experts from local landfills and state water and waste agencies can be present.

Fore, who supervises the county's solid waste management and recycling services, delivered a presentation on the county's proposal at a convention of state and local waste authorities last week. Among the topics covered were the lessons Monterey County has learned during the planning process. Chief among those, Ramirez said, was the need for community outreach and expert education early in the process.