



City of San Juan Bautista

The “City of History”

JULY 22, 2022

PRESS RELEASE

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REGARDING: SETTLEMENT REACHED WITH THE CENTRAL COAST REGIONAL WATER QUALITY CONTROL BOARD

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After extensive negotiations, the City of San Juan Bautista (“City”) has reached a settlement with the Regional Water Quality Control Board for the Central Coast Region (“Regional Board”) regarding the payment of mandatory minimum penalties under California Water Code section 13385 for alleged violations of the City’s expired 2009 Wastewater Permit, reaching back more than a decade, related to the City’s treated municipal wastewater discharged into No-Name Creek. For a variety of reasons, the City agreed to a settlement instead of proceeding to a hearing before the Regional Board.

In August of 2020, the City and the federal Environmental Protection Agency (“US-EPA”) reached agreement on an Administrative Order on Consent, addressing the same problems alleged by the Regional Board. The City agreed to fund an \$18 million force-main project (“Project”) to send the City’s wastewater to Hollister’s Waste Water Treatment Plant, which will end the City’s reliance upon a discharge into the creek (and any further violations). The City’s priorities are and have been in alignment with the concerns addressed by the US-EPA’s Order On Consent and now this settlement with the Regional Board: first, remove the City’s Wastewater Treatment Plant effluent discharge from the creek; second, import and blend with its municipal water supply water from the West Hills Water Treatment Plant; and third, resolve all penalties and alleged violations. However, the Regional Board has independent enforcement authority over the exact same issues as were resolved in the US-EPA



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settlement and the Regional Board exercised that authority by seeking substantial fines and penalties from the City, which amounted to nearly one million dollars.

To fund the corrective Project, the City approved a substantial rate increase on December 14, 2021. The Project's design is 90% complete. The Project is anticipated to break ground in the Summer of 2022, and be completed by November 2023. This will solve the first concern regarding discharge to the creek.

The Regional Board's second concern is related to salt in the water supply. Most of the problem originates with the City's well water, which is hard and contains a high level of salt. The salt content of the water is further exacerbated by the water softeners which citizens use to treat the hard water, which adds more salt to the wastewater, which after treatment goes into the creek. The salt content of the wastewater cannot be fully treated by the City's current wastewater treatment system and would require hundreds of millions of dollars of advanced treatment to adequately reduce salt before being sent to the creek. The City chose a less costly alternative to close its Wastewater Treatment Plant and send its municipal wastewater to Hollister's plant instead. Further, the City will reduce salt by diversifying and improving the source of water used by our citizens. This will result in providing better drinking water to our citizens. However, until the Project is complete or the permit is reissued, the City will continue to be subjected to the outdated and overly stringent permit requirements related to salt which, should the City not meet certain Project milestones, could result in hundreds of thousands of dollars of additional fines to the City even after the Settlement.

Because the underlying issues are being addressed, the City sought reasonable relief from the Regional Board for some of the past fines and a suspension of future fines and penalties until the force-main Project is built so that the total potential liability can be known and addressed. The Regional Board agreed to part of this reasonable request by removing 37 of the oldest violations and not issuing penalties for those alleged violations. The Regional Board also agreed to allow the City to retain and apply a significant amount of the penalties to the costs of the Project.



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Since January 2019, the City’s Wastewater Treatment Plant has improved its performance and has experienced quarters with no reported exceedances. In 2020, the City adopted a prohibition against brine producing water softeners and has since participated in a water softener buyback program to reduce the salt content of the wastewater. The City recently adopted its new rate structure requiring 14% increases annually and up to a 70% increase over 5 years. The City will do everything in its power to avoid increasing rates again and appreciates being able to work with the Regional Board to this end.

IMPORTANT LINKS: https://www.san-juan-bautista.ca.us/alert_detail.php