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Viewpoint: County's take on Los Osos sewer project

Paavo Ogren and Mark Hutchinson

On Friday, The Tribune published a Viewpoint written by Morgan Rafferty of the Environmental Center of San Luis Obispo and Jackie Crabb of the San Luis Obispo Farm Bureau opposing the county's efforts to resolve the long-standing wastewater problem in Los Osos. The Viewpoint includes inflammatory and incorrect assertions, exaggerates impacts and is arguably irresponsible in light of the project's history. The county project team has consistently been reaching out to the agricultural and environmental communities, yet the authors made no efforts to discuss their concerns, or check their "facts," with the county before submitting their Viewpoint.

Among numerous errors, the Viewpoint incorrectly asserts: 1) that the wastewater project does "nothing" for the community's water problems; 2) that prime agricultural land will be removed from productivity without consideration of whether feasible alternatives exist (an evaluation required by the California Coastal Act); 3) that the county is not considering "tertiary" treatment; and 4) that the visual impacts of a 32 acre "industrial site" would conflict with the county's viewshed policies.

We understand that the Los Osos wastewater project is extremely complex, including its relationship to water supplies, and in fact the county's efforts are extensive on this point. The San Luis Obispo County Water Resources Advisory Committee will be holding a special session on April 4 at 8:30 a.m. in the Supervisors Chambers to specifically discuss the relationship between the county's wastewater efforts and the water management efforts of the community water purveyors.

Those water purveyors are currently under the jurisdiction of the San Luis Obispo County Superior Court as a result of ongoing groundwater litigation.

Attachment 3

The county is participating in the litigation, which benefits the community by helping coordinate wastewater project efforts with water management efforts. The Farm Bureau especially would be wise to understand that these coordinated efforts significantly reduce the chances that the Los Osos urban groundwater litigation will spread to adjacent agricultural areas just as the Santa Maria Groundwater Basin litigation (initiated in Santa Barbara County) spread to urban and agricultural areas in San Luis Obispo County as far north as the five-cities and the base of Lopez dam.

On their other points, Rafferty and Crabb are also incorrect. All viable sites meet the same definition of prime soils used to evaluate Tonini, and the requirements of the Local Coastal Plan are being met. The project clearly allows for tertiary treatment with the details, timing and nature of implementation being considered as part of the cooperative water management efforts. Lastly, the project will not be a "32-acre industrial site;" it will be an 11-acre complex of agricultural style facilities with native landscaping designed to fit the visual setting.

We recognize that there is no such thing as a perfect project for Los Osos, but Rafferty and Crabb's claim that our proposal is "fatally flawed" only leads to further polarization and entrenchment in Los Osos when we are at a time when responsible discussion is necessary for the best project. We invite them to attend the upcoming hearings and engage with us in those discussions.

Paavo Ogren is the county Public Works director. Mark Hutchinson is the county Environmental Division manager.