

Ulterior agendas

Is development the reason why Morro Bay chose an expensive location for its WRF?

By [Nancy Bast](#)

Many Morro Bay residents have asked *why* the city has so vehemently pursued siting the new water reclamation facility (WRF) at the South Bay Boulevard location, to the exclusion of any other possible site and despite so much resident opposition. That site is the most expensive of the sites studied and presents potential major changes in how Morro Bay will look in the future.

Clues to the city's possible motive lie in the terms of the memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the city and the TRI-W Corporation, which owns the South Bay Boulevard property. The MOU could indicate major development for the land adjacent to the proposed WRF site.

The 30 acres the city intends to buy from TRI-W is part of a 396-acre tract of land consisting of three parcels. The largest parcel (named the "remainder parcel" in the MOU), which includes the proposed WRF site, is located outside city limits. The other two are inside city limits. Why buy 30 acres, when the current plant is 5.7 acres? Perhaps as a buffer to development?

To facilitate development of undeveloped land, three conditions are essential. First is approval of the land's inclusion in the city's sphere of influence. That designation means adjacent land could be annexed to the city. Secondly, infrastructure (city services, like sewer and water) must be available. Thirdly, there must be good access to the property.

Two recitals in the MOU address the sphere of influence and provision of city services to the property. MOU No. 8 says the "city will process an annexation proposal for the property to modify its sphere of influence to include the remainder parcel." That would pave the way for annexing the land currently outside city limits into the city. That land then too could receive city infrastructure services. MOU No. 10 states the "city will continue to supply city services to adjacent parcels within city limits," which "currently have (historical) water service from city meters and city hereby agrees to continue to provide that water service at rates applied to other similar uses." A farmhouse and farm buildings, since demolished, once stood on that parcel.

Two recitals address access to the entire TRI-W property. Lack of access has been a major deterrent to otherwise legal development on TRI-W land within city limits. Although 150 acres of the property already lie within city limits, they are virtually landlocked. In the late 1980s, access to the property from city streets was estimated to cost \$3 million to be funded by the city's taxpayers.

MOU No. 9 reads, "the access and utility easements to be provided over the remainder parcel ... will be improved and maintained by the city." MOU No. 11 promises that the "city will provide assistance to owner for owner to confirm the validity of the existing access easements adjoining both the adjacent parcels within the city limits and the remainder parcel and will assist owner to assure access from the city's right-of-way to those parcels." The right-of-way is from South Bay Boulevard to the new WRF.

MOU No. 13 addresses water. It says, "the city agrees to provide that recycled water for agricultural uses on the remainder parcel at rates applied to other similar users within the city." How much and what quality of recycled water is not specified, but the city water system is planned to be extended to the WRF for fire suppression. From there it could be extended to the TRI-W property.

The three necessary elements for development will potentially be satisfied by these terms of the MOUs. With the presence of adjacent developed property (the WRF, the Casa de Flores facility, the small housing tract next to Casa de Flores, and the Radcliffe housing tract on the property's west end), it would not be difficult for the city to argue that the land for grazing is no longer viable or appropriate (cultivation was ruled out long ago).

Rezoning to commercial, visitor serving, and housing could be made to appear very logical.

Any annexation to Morro Bay must be approved by a vote of its citizens. How would the city sell this idea to a community that has long resisted the destruction of its small-town character?

It isn't difficult to imagine the city arguing that the onerous burden of sewer/water bills for the grossly expensive new WRF project and the city's financial shortfalls would be alleviated by having hundreds more ratepayers to share the high costs.

Out of desperation, voters might approve annexation of TRI-W property currently outside city limits and the development of the hillsides would begin.

Some may say this scenario is fantasy, but many will recognize its plausibility. The city's dogged insistence on moving forward with its completely unaffordable and, in many ways, illogical WRF project does not appear to make sense in any other context. Δ

Nancy Bast is a 40-year Morro Bay resident and member of Citizens for Affordable Living, a group "dedicated to building a WRF within budget defined by the current sewer rate structure vote." Send comments through the editor at clanham@newtimesslo.com or write a letter for publication and email it to letters@newtimesslo.com.