

Country club golf course plans sewer plant as newer fix for grass water woes

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SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT (publ. 8/4/2015, pg. A4)

A story about a proposed sewer treatment plant at Diablo Country Club incorrectly reported Linda Hu's employer. She is an engineer with the East Bay Municipal Utility District

DIABLO -- Responding to Mother Nature and bureaucrats ordering water cutbacks, a century-old private golf course at the base of Mount Diablo plans to become what is likely the first in California to build its own mini-sewage plant to keep its greens and fairways lush for years to come.

Operators of the 128-acre, 18-hole Diablo Country Club golf course plan to spend \$6 million to \$10 million to build an on-site, 6,000-square-foot sewage plant that could deliver up to 500,000 gallons of recycled water per day. The golf course this year is using an average of about 165,700 gallons per day.



"We want to control our own destiny and have a sustainable water supply," said Larry Marx, general manager of the country club, which is surrounded on three sides by million-dollar and multimillion dollar homes. "It's hard to see how any California golf course in 10 to 15 years will rely entirely on potable water."

The project will be paid for by the club's 436 members through their annual golfing dues, Marx said.

Effluent for the affluent -- it's the latest example of how the drought is changing water use in the state.

Longtime Diablo resident Jerry Slavonia says he thinks it's a positive plan to reclaim the waste water in the area to water the course at Diablo

Water scarcities and rising prices have spurred about one-third of the state's golf courses to use recycled water -- highly refined sewer water -- but they typically get it delivered in public pipes from publicly owned sewage plants.

Unincorporated Diablo, east of Danville, however, is locked out of that plumbing loop because it is miles from any pipes that provide reclaimed water.

The country club plans to construct a sewage plant on the golf course and then pipe in untreated sewage from a mainline serving Diablo, Blackhawk and part of Danville. New pipes and renovated ponds would store and deliver the treated water to greens, fairways and tees.

The project will save as much water a year as used by 1,000 average households in the East Bay Municipal Utility District.

Marx said he expects the project to pay for itself in perhaps 15 years by reducing purchases of fresh tap water. The payoff, he said, will be faster if Diablo Country Club can get low-interest state loans to finance the project.

Once online, the recycled water will largely insulate the golf course from drought shortages such as the current crisis. Golf courses and other large landscape customers in EBMUD's jurisdiction were ordered to slash water use 40 percent.

Carl Santa Maria, a country club golf course member, said he is leaning toward supporting the project.

"It's a lot of money," he said, "but we have a responsibility to this 100-year-old course to sustain it, and we need a reliable water supply to do that."



East Bay water and sewer agencies have signed memorandums of understanding to support and help plan the project.

"By reducing their use of potable water, the country club is leaving more for everyone else in EBMUD," said John Coleman, the East Bay water board member who represents the area. "It's a great project."

Linda Hu, an EBMUD engineer, said she hopes the project can serve as a model for others to increase water reliability.

"This is breaking new ground for us," she said. "We hope to learn from it."

The Central Contra Costa Sanitary District must approve the project, and has not yet determined whether a full environmental impact report will be required. Contra Costa County is not requiring a land-use permit, according to the sanitary district. Course operators hope to start construction in 2016 and finish by April 2017, in time for the spring irrigation season.

Ironically, the plant is planned in a community that has the highest per-capita residential water use of any within EBMUD boundaries: 345 gallons per day per person, seven times more than low-water use communities such as San Lorenzo and Berkeley.

The project won't do anything to change those numbers, though, because golf course water use is not counted as residential use.

Diablo Country Club golf course operators started talking about the project in 2010. The drought and EBMUD's water cutbacks made it more urgent.

"We want to be good environmental citizens," Marx said, "and we want to have sustainable supplies."

He estimated the project will provide 70 percent of the water used by the golf course.

Marx said the sewage plant will be located as far away as possible from neighbors bordering the country club.

Some 96 percent of the effluent will become recycled water. The solids will be put back in a pipe and shipped to the sanitary district's sewage plant in Martinez for treatment.

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