

## Novato's \$6 million water recycling plant nears completion

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At the Novato Sanitary District, a yellow backhoe scoops up coffee-colored gravel as workers swarm nearby, putting the final touches in place for the August opening of a \$6 million recycling plant that will save Novato 150 million gallons of water a year.

The new plant is on the grounds of the sanitary district's headquarters near the De Long Avenue exit off Highway 101 and will augment its existing operations. The North Marin Water District is a partner in the project, funded by state and federal grants as well as ratepayer money.

Like alchemists turning lead into gold, operators at the new plant will transform toilet water into grass. The treated wastewater produced by the 1.7-million-gallon recycling center will irrigate landscapes including those of Fireman's Fund Insurance Co. and Valley Memorial Park Cemetery, both in Novato.

The sanitary district will treat the water and the water district will distribute it. The new plant will save enough water to supply about 1,400 single-family homes for a year.

When someone flushes a toilet in Novato, the wastewater travels to the Novato Sanitary District's sewage treatment plant, where it receives primary and secondary treatment. The new plant, which is being built by Sacramento-based Gateway Pacific Contractors, will supply what is known as tertiary treatment.

"Right now we have facilities that take raw sewage and treat it to the point that it is safe to put in the bay or use for pastures," said Beverly James, manager-engineer of the sanitary district. "The new plant takes that water and filters and disinfects it so it is safe to use in places like golf courses and country clubs for irrigation."

Water in those locations must be cleaner because, for example, a sprinkler might go off and douse a visitor, James said.

In the world of water recycling, what's good for people is not necessarily good for plants.

"If you purify water for drinking you take out phosphorus and nitrogen, but if it's just for irrigation we leave it in because it's healthy for plants," James said.

The pear, apple, plum and persimmon trees at the sanitary district headquarters, watered with recycled water, attest to the veracity of her statement. "We had to fence them off because deer were eating the fruit," James added, citing what sounded like the ultimate endorsement.

Using recycled water for irrigation means there is more potable water that can be used for drinking. Currently, only 1.4 percent of Novato's water is recycled, "but that's expected to grow to 7 percent in the next decade," said Chris DeGabriele, who has been the general manager of North Marin Water District since 1995.

The new recycling plant at Novato Sanitary and a similar plant in the Las Gallinas Valley Sanitary District are expected to make the difference.

The Novato Sanitary District's new water recycling center is part of a bigger project, the North Bay Water Reuse Authority. Bill Long, chairman of the Novato Sanitary District board, was a key figure in the movement.

"Seven or eight years ago, we started working with some of the other water districts and sewage agencies in the North Bay to put together a coalition that could be more effective in getting state and federal funding," Long said. "At the outset, we weren't sure we would succeed." Now, as the Novato facility and other projects near completion, Long said, "I'm very satisfied."

"We're excited about the new plant. It's a major step toward resource conservation," James said. "It's also an insurance policy for Novato in the event of a drought because these significant irrigators would still have water."

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