

WWTP Ad Hoc Committee Meeting Summary Report

Meeting Dates: 8 October 2026

Committee Members Present: Rock Rockenbach, Carter Ohlmann

Staff Present: General Manager Weigold, Stephen, Bryce and Marco

Contractors Present: none

Duration: Approximately 2.0 hours

Submitted by: Carter Ohlmann; 12 October 2026

History

Technical Memo Two (TM2) is the component of the Southland Investment Grade Audit (IGA) that begins to address the potential cost and feasibility of connecting the Montecito Sanitary District to the City of Santa Barbara's El Estero Water Resource Center. The Board approved the Southland contract to include TM2 at the 10 September 2025 meeting. Discussions with Southland and staff about the scope of TM2 has led the Committee to discuss whether the current scope will provide the Board the information it needs to make an informed decision regarding local treatment or connecting to Santa Barbara – El Estero.

At the 9 September Board meeting, the Board voted unanimously to direct staff to engage the City of Santa Barbara to determine the most appropriate approach, associated cost, and timeline for obtaining the City of Santa Barbara's flow acceptance parameters, and determine how this information should be incorporated into the analysis of a Santa Barbara connection option. The City's flow acceptance parameters ultimately bare on hydraulics and equalization, and are a necessary first step in understanding the required infrastructure for connection to Santa Barbara, and thus capital costs.

At the 23 September Board meeting staff reported on their meeting with the City of Santa Barbara regarding connection to El Estero. Staff discussed the triggering of City's \$100k charge for City staff time in studying connection. It was reported by MSD Staff that the City wants to take influent from 11pm to 6 am. This requires flow equalization capacity. Santa Barbara staff considered equalizing flow at their plant and suggested 2 (two) 2,500,000 gallon equalization basins are necessary. The City would require two force mains, not a single pipe. It was reported that Santa Barbara would lead all construction to connect that is not on MSD land – MSD would have to negotiate its role. Presently the City is utilizing roughly 62.5% of its wastewater recycling capacity. While MSD influent could be recycled, there is presently no demand for the recycled water. The City indicated environmental permitting (Coastal Commission would be involved) would be onerous and have a significant effect on timeline. Timeline of 7-8 years was mentioned.

A JPA would be set up for services. City staff brought up a hybrid solution where wet weather flows were treated at MSD.

At the 23 September Board meeting the Board voted unanimously to direct staff to utilize the criteria laid out in the Wastewater Treatment Plant Improvement Project Ad Hoc committee report presented at the 9 September 2026 Regular Meeting as the revised scope of Technical Memorandum #2. The Board also voted unanimously to direct staff to reach out to Carollo Engineers to get an idea of timing, scope, and cost to provide the information requested in the scope of Technical Memorandum #2. It had previously been suggested by several Board members that having Carollo Engineering expand on their 2023 report made good sense for exploration of the Santa Barbara connection option. First, some of the questions have previously been addressed by Carollo. Second, Southland is involved in the existing plant design work and could be perceived as having a conflict when evaluating an alternative that might reduce the need for that work.

Overview

The meeting focused on how MSD should address its aging wastewater treatment plant while determining whether to continue treating wastewater locally or connect to the City of Santa Barbara's system.

The central issue is sequencing decisions and obtaining reliable information before committing to major expenditures. The discussion covered timing for connecting to the City should that option be chosen, the scope of TM2 (the analysis of connecting to Santa Barbara), urgent equipment needs, and contingency planning for equipment failures.

A main message is that TM2 needs to provide useful, decision-relevant information—not merely confirm a choice that has already been made. This information gathering will take time. It is important that necessary WWTP maintenance and upgrades not be neglected during the information gathering period. Aged-out and unmaintained infrastructure can pose significant financial and environmental risks to the district.

Board-Level Summary

The central theme of the meeting was how the Montecito Sanitary District (MSD) should maintain its aging wastewater treatment plant while determining whether to continue treating wastewater locally or connect to the City of Santa Barbara's El Estero treatment plant.

The most important takeaway is that MSD needs three distinct but coordinated plans:

1. **Local treatment:** What work and investment are required to rehabilitate the existing plant and continue treating wastewater in Montecito?
2. **Connection to Santa Barbara:** What infrastructure, costs, permits, agreements, and operating arrangements would be required to convey MSD's wastewater to El Estero?

3. **Interim reliability:** What must MSD repair or replace now to operate safely and reliably until either long-term option is implemented?

A fundamental planning challenge is that MSD must make near-term infrastructure decisions before the cost, feasibility, and schedule of the long-term treatment decision have been fully established. Delaying necessary work could leave the District exposed to equipment failures, emergency expenses, and environmental or regulatory consequences.

A critical unresolved question is how long a connection to Santa Barbara would take. Timelines ranging from three to ten years, measured from the start of engineering design through construction completion, have been discussed. However, a reliable schedule supported by a planning or engineering firm familiar with the necessary infrastructure and permitting requirements could not be found by the Committee.

The District needs a defensible schedule that accounts for City negotiations, engineering, environmental review, permitting, and construction. The longer a connection takes, the more infrastructure MSD may need to maintain or replace in the interim. According to the recent Stantec study, a substantial portion of the existing plant would be beyond its expected useful life within the next eight to ten years. The Board should therefore not assume that connecting to Santa Barbara would eliminate the need for major near-term investment. The extent of that investment will depend in part on the actual connection schedule.

The existing belt press presents an immediate reliability concern. Staff reported corroded controls that cannot be properly adjusted and recurring alarms. Replacement parts are no longer manufactured and are available only through the secondary market, leaving the equipment dependent on significant staff attention and temporary workarounds.

Staff are evaluating a new screw press, a technology recommended by the Southland IGA's evaluation of dewatering alternatives. A pilot test, expected to run for approximately three weeks in January subject to equipment availability, will determine whether the screw press can adequately dewater the District's sludge under actual operating conditions. The District will not be charged for the pilot test. If successful, the new technology could eliminate the need for both aerobic digestion and dissolved air flotation thickening (DAFT), potentially reducing operating costs and avoiding additional investment in the dewatering process. The preliminary purchase estimate discussed was approximately \$500,000.

The Board should be cautious of letting uncertainty about the long-term treatment option compromise near-term reliability of plant operations. MSD needs a credible connection schedule, a comparable assessment of the local-treatment alternative, and a prioritized plan for essential interim repairs and replacements. Together, these will allow the Board to evaluate long-term options while managing the risks and costs the District faces today.

Finally, staff reported that Southland would provide a “back-of-the-envelope” estimate of the cost to construct infrastructure to connect to the City based on the rough criteria determined at the recent meeting between MSD and the City. Criteria were reported by staff at the 23 September 2026 Board meeting and are summarized in the History section above. The cost estimate is expected in the next few months. Staff also reported Carollo Engineering had been contacted regarding a quote for a study on connecting to Santa Barbara (TM2).

Action Items Taken

None.

Recommendations to Board

It is recommended that the Board have a full understanding of the pros and cons (including required infrastructure and costs) of connecting to the City vs local treatment before making a decision about which option is best for the community.