

# Agenda Report



**Watsonville**  
CALIFORNIA

**MEETING DATE:** Tuesday, September 10, 2024

**TO:** City Council

**FROM:** PUBLIC WORKS & UTILITIES DIRECTOR LINDBERG  
ASST. PUBLIC WORKS & UTILITIES DIRECTOR GREEN

**SUBJECT:** LICENSE AGREEMENT WITH RYAN SMITH CONSULTING TO  
ESTABLISH A PILOT PROJECT FOR COMPOSTING RESEARCH  
LOCATED ON CITY OF WATSONVILLE PROPERTY AT THE  
WASTEWATER TREATMENT FACILITY LOCATED AT 401  
PANABAKER LANE

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## **RECOMMENDED ACTION:**

Adopt a resolution approving a license agreement with Ryan Smith Consulting to establish a pilot project for container based composting research located on City of Watsonville property at the Wastewater Treatment Facility located at 401 Panabaker Lane; and authorizing and directing City Manager to execute same.

## **BACKGROUND:**

The County of Santa Cruz, GiveLove (a California non-profit), and Ryan Smith db Ryan Smith Consulting have partnered to implement a 6-month pilot project to test a container-based sanitation collection and treatment model. The project aims to develop a proof-of-concept for alternative sanitation services that can be incorporated into emergency preparedness, response, and recovery plans. A license agreement with GiveLove was previously approved by the City Council (Resolution No. 109-23) for this activity. However, Ryan Smith Consulting will be the contractor performing the pilot project activities on-site. Therefore, staff recommends that Council approve a new license agreement with Ryan Smith Consulting.

## **DISCUSSION:**

The 2020 CZU fire complex resulted in the destruction of approximately 900 homes and 1,500 total structures. The County Planning Division identified the cost of onsite wastewater treatments systems ("OWTS," formerly known as septic systems) as the primary impediment to rebuilding efforts. Thus, County leadership engaged with GiveLove, a California nonprofit established in 2010, and Ryan Smith Consulting to design and implement a container-based sanitation pilot project. The purpose of the project is to inform local City, County, and State leadership of the viability of alternative sanitation systems.

Container-based sanitation (“CBS,” also commonly referred to as compost toilets) is a lesser-known method of safe sanitation that does not require water to convey excreta (urine and feces). It follows the same steps of what the World Health Organization calls the sanitation service chain: containment, collection, transportation, treatment, and final reuse or disposal of end products. These are the same steps wastewater systems use, with the difference being that CBS systems do not use water and underground pipes as a means of conveyance, and a simple composting site is required for treatment instead of a wastewater treatment facility.

GiveLove has been implementing CBS systems for communities in high-needs contexts around the world since the first major earthquake in Haiti in 2010. As this relates to Watsonville, the January and March 2023 atmospheric rivers and levee breaches highlighted the vulnerability of the City’s wastewater treatment facility. In March specifically, attention at the local, regional, and State level was paid to the Pajaro River flooding and the potential for the levee along the treatment facility’s perimeter to breach, over-top, or otherwise experience some other mode of failure.

Flooding of this critical infrastructure would result in a catastrophic failure of equipment and several months of work to restore adequate wastewater pumping and treatment operations. During this time, Watsonville and communities in the Pajaro Valley would experience an immediate public health crisis and long lasting negative environmental consequences.

The City’s wastewater treatment facility (WWTF) is an ideal location to host this small pilot project as it relates to permitting in two ways:

1. Composting at the facility is “categorically exempt” under CEQA because the WWTF holds a Coastal Conditional Use Permit for the land use and project type. The pilot project is complementary to the description in the existing land use permit. The project can be considered an existing use at an existing facility that is a publicly (City) owned utility used to provide public services.
2. A Regional Water Quality Control Board waste discharge requirement (WDR) permit would not be required because the composting activity will be co-located at the WWTF’s biosolids drying area and, thus, covered under the facility’s existing operating permit.

In addition, Monterey Air Resources District staff have confirmed that an air permit is not required for this small pilot project. Last, the project falls within a Calrecycle notification tier for a research composting operation. No other regulatory approvals are required.

The footprint of this pilot is small (1,000 square feet) and will require minimum access and maintenance from Ryan Smith Consulting. No staff time will be utilized in this pilot. At the end of the 6-month pilot, a technical report of findings will be provided by Ryan Smith Consulting that could be used to inform a first-of-its-kind emergency preparedness, response, and recovery sanitation implementation plan.

**STRATEGIC PLAN:**

This license agreement is consistent with strategic plan goals:

2-Infrastructure & Environment

5-Public Safety

**FINANCIAL IMPACT:**

There are no known direct financial impacts to approving this license agreement. The de minimis administrative cost associated with executing this license agreement will be offset by the research report deliverable that will be provided to the City at the end of the pilot study.

**ALTERNATIVE ACTION:**

The City Council could elect not to approve the proposed license agreement.

**ATTACHMENTS AND/OR REFERENCES (If any):**

None.