

## EDITORIAL

# Novato should take next step on sewer plant

**T**HE NOVATO Sanitary District board usually toils away in near solitude.

But last week, its consideration of a privatization plan drew a large and vocal crowd of more than 120 people. The meeting was held at the Margaret Todd Senior Center to accommodate the expected throng, which still spilled outside.

Tonight's board meeting will be at the same place.

Many in the crowd were angry at the proposal to have a private firm operate the district's new treatment plant. The issue has generated controversy and hard feelings because eight workers fear losing their jobs — certainly no small consideration in this economy. Their union, local labor supporters and family members have rallied behind them, seeking to derail the board's consideration of a plan that could save the district several million dollars over five years.

The district board is scheduled to vote tonight on whether to begin negotiations with an experienced private plant-management firm. It should take that step.

There is much at stake. The district's new \$90 million plant is almost ready to start up. Experienced top management is needed to make sure that complex process goes smoothly.

The board's decision has been made more complicated by the tenor of the debate at preceding hearings.

This is one of the most important decisions members of the Novato Sanitary District board will make. They will be deciding whether to start the process of turning over operation of their most important facility to a private company.

The five board members, who usually enjoy relative political anonymity, need to make sure that they have done all they could to en-

gage the public — not just those who have turned out for recent meetings.

Having the board meetings taped and broadcast on local cable TV is a good move.

Board members and top district staff need to make sure that the public — the 60,000 residents they serve — has had every opportunity to learn about and react to the pluses and minuses of the proposed change.

The district board has been studying this change since February. It seems to have done its homework, including numerous visits to other treatment plants.

Private operation of public sewer plants is not a new concept. In many communities, it has been a longstanding and successful relationship. For those where the arrangement hasn't worked, lessons learned from those experiences should help shape the district's contract.

The public deserves that assurance before a contract is signed, which likely will happen before the end of August.

Turning the job of running the plant over to private management means the district can focus its attention and money on keeping its mains and residential and business laterals in good repair.

To walk away from saving taxpayers millions of dollars because eight district workers feel less secure working for an established private operator would be the wrong decision. Directors have made sure that district workers will have a three-year employment commitment from the private operator. They will not take salary cuts or be transferred to other plants. The board has gone out of its way to make sure those workers are treated fairly.

District directors need to remain focused on who they work for and represent — local ratepayers.