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Recognition for Moraga's Public Works Department

2013 Project of the Year Award

By Sophie Braccini

The Moraga Public Works Department recently received the 2013 Project of the Year Award for small cities given by the Northern California Chapter of the American Public Works Association for its Integrated Pest Management policy. The program was adopted by the Moraga Town Council in 2006. It is carried out by the town, despite strict budgetary constraints, through the perseverance of staff.

When the council resolved to stop using any type of chemicals in its parks and at the Hacienda de las Flores, the deciding factor was children. With an IPM in place, said public works superintendent Dan Bernie at the time, "children can roll in the grass, families can picnic in the parks with a total peace of mind."

According to Bernie, "Weeding without chemicals is very demanding in terms of manpower" so several programs were implemented to do the job without breaking the bank. The town hired Futures Explored, a group that seeks to provide life skills and work-related training to adults with developmental disabilities who work under supervision. Students from Saint Mary's College volunteer once a year with weeding. And the Work Alternative Program, a labor program for minor offenders, provides 8,000 hours per year to the town.

Pest control was also a big concern. Things like owl boxes, integrated bat nesting and raptor poles allow the town to use beneficial wildlife to control larger critters such as gophers and rats. "We have introduced emerging, least toxic alternative methods ... in place of rodenticides that have been responsible for the demise of natural predators and domestic pets," noted Edric Kwan, Moraga's new public works director and town engineer.

The town also uses 100 percent organic fertilizers and supplies such as hand soaps and cleaning products - representing approximately 95 percent of the janitorial supplies - and orange peel products to control termites. The only chemical still in use is RoundUp, which is occasionally applied to median strips.

"The town specifically has stopped using all synthetic, ammonium-based fertilizers for all turf and landscape maintenance," said Kwan. "By using only organically derived fertilizers, the town of Moraga is also decreasing the emission of greenhouse gases."

To implement the plan the council had to approve a 10 percent increase in the pest management budget and train staff in new techniques. The latter effort was so successful that Bernie has difficulty keeping his staff. "PG&E and EBMUD love to get people coming from our department," he said two years after the implementation. "They are well trained and are not afraid to work."

"Dan Bernie went beyond IPM," said Susan Jun Fish, founder of the grassroots organization Parents for a Safer Environment that first convinced Bernie and the council that public space could be maintained efficiently without chemicals. "What he does is such a huge gift to the community and the environment."

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