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Fountain Valley Living[®]

APRIL 2024



OC SAN
KEEPS US GOING
WITH THE FLOW
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GM Rob Thompson on the new bridge over Ellis connecting the new headquarters to the FV plant.

Photos by **Scott Rogers** / Fountain Valley Living Magazine

OC Sanitation keeps 2.6 million residents going with the flow

By **Susan Christian Goulding**
Fountain Valley Living Magazine

The Orange County Sanitation District (OC San) takes on the essential work that most of us don't (and don't want to) think about much: processing sewage for some two dozen cities, from La Habra to Seal Beach to Newport Beach to Anaheim.

Our sewage system has undergone a massive transformation since the county's first agency, founded in 1921, began pumping sewage to the Huntington Beach shoreline.

The agency, which has facilities in both Fountain Valley and Huntington Beach employs 655 employees and is currently constructing a new headquarters building in Fountain Valley.

General manager Rob Thompson shares with us some history and facts about OC San. Don't worry — we keep it clean.

Fountain Valley Living Magazine: I watched videos on the ocsan.gov web-

site and still couldn't begin to explain what you do. It's extremely complex.

Can you give us the abridged version?

Thompson: Every single day, we collect 180 million gallons of wastewater that otherwise would cause widespread diseases and convert that flow into valuable resources such as energy, drinking water and fertilizer.

FVLM: How many residents do you serve?

Thompson: We serve 2.6 million Orange County residents. Thanks to showerheads, faucets and toilets designed to use less water, flows have gone down from 240 million gallons a day in 2000 to 180 million today.

FVLM: What is the history of OC San? Who was responsible for Orange County's sewage before?

Thompson: Orange County Joint Outfall Sewer was formed in 1921 to pipe sewage to the ocean at Huntington Beach. The County Sanitation Districts



One of the barscreens which remove 'solid' material from waste water.

of Orange County took over those duties in 1954, becoming the Orange County Sanitation District in 1998.

In the mid-fifties, the outfall went out one mile offshore. (The outfall is the final

discharge pipe of a wastewater collection system.) The system was primarily gravity-based (as opposed to mechanical).

Over the decades, methods for sewage treatment and disposal have improved dramatically. There hasn't been untreated wastewater going into the ocean since the 1960s.

In 1971, a new 12-foot-wide outfall became operational, pumping ecologically safe wastewater five miles out into the ocean. Today the water we release is very clean.

FVLM: How many miles of the sewage lines snake through central Orange County? Is the infrastructure starting to show its age?

Thompson: We have 388 miles of sewer pipes throughout our service area. We're constantly reinvesting in our infrastructure to make sure it's up to date. We never let pipes reach the point of failure.

We have a bunch of new tools that give us flexibility to do repairs. One method is by using a sock dipped in epoxy which we thread in through a pipe. Any cracks in the pipe are sealed in place. It saves the community from a lot of trouble and inconvenience.



Upgrade of the FV Headworks facility – where the treatment process begins.

FVLM: Tell us about yourself. Where did you grow up, and how'd a nice guy like you get into the sewage business?

Thompson: I grew up right here in Orange County. I majored in electrical engineering at Cal Poly Pomona and then got a master's in public administration at Cal State Long Beach.

I began my career at a petroleum company as a production equipment designer. I worked in northern Alaska for 20 months. I realized I'd better find a different job before my wife got too fed up with my long absences.

I thought, where can I get a job that won't be outsourced, and where they won't send me to Timbuktu because the facilities are right here? OC Sanitation

would be fantastic!

FVLM: And, you were already an expert in pipelines.

Thompson: Yes, I understand the process from the points of view of mechanical engineering, electrical engineering and civil engineering. I started at OC San as an engineer on the operations side and eventually was promoted to management positions.

FVLM: Where do you live now?

Thompson: I live in Old Town Tustin in the same house I grew up in, with my wife and three kids.

My wife teaches culinary arts at OCC. We joke that she deals with the beginning of the system, and I deal with the exit.



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