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Editorials

Speed up toxics inspections

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The San Jose City Council should OK a plan to double staff and funding

SOMETHING refreshing happened last week when a report criticizing San Jose's Hazardous Materials Program landed on desks at City Hall.

Instead of backpedaling, or offering vague assurances that the matter would be looked into, city officials almost immediately presented a blueprint for improving the process by which toxics storage facilities are inspected and permitted in San Jose.

Their proposal, spurred by earlier criticism from the Environmental Protection Agency and the city's own Office of Environmental Management, would more than double staff and funding.

These major provisions have been approved by the City Council's environment

committee, and the full council should approve them as well. Still being ironed out is a plan to make the program self-funding.

San Jose has lagged behind the rest of the county in complying with the 1983 ordinance that created the program. Last year, the city inspected and permitted only 43 percent of the storage sites within its borders, compared with nearly 100 percent in Palo Alto and Sunnyvale.

Program expansion also is necessary if the city is to deal effectively with large industrial users of toxic materials. So far, as was underscored in last week's critique by the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, inspectors have focused on small storage sites at small businesses.

Assistant City Manager Les White says over-attentiveness to small firms was part of a strategy to enable inspectors to get up to speed before tackling large users. However, because of inadequate resources, "the shift never quite occurred."

It should. With expansion of the program, it can.