

WATER SCHOOL JUST THE START OF VOCATIONAL TRAINING VISION

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VALLEY SPRINGS - Businessman Tom Coe's dream of remaking Valley Springs into a hub for vocational training and industry is now more than just a dream.

A key piece of Coe's vision - a school to train water utility plant operators - began holding classes on an elementary school campus in town over summer and is expected to move in a few months to the 640 acres of industrial-zoned land Coe owns just north of Valley Springs.

"I am hoping that it is really going to open some doors for further development into other areas of technology," said Coe, a multimillionaire who made his fortune in the machine tool industry.

Coe and his partners have faced obstacles. Their proposal to provide San Joaquin Delta College a site to build a satellite campus was rejected by college officials in 2010. Delta officials, stung by recent cost overruns at their Mountain House campus in southwestern San Joaquin County, projected the proposed Calaveras campus would cost more than three times as much as Coe projected.

And then in 2011, Calaveras County supervisors rejected Coe's application to create a recreational shooting center on the site that would also serve as a recreational shooting products development facility.

Several industrial businesses already are on Coe's property, including a clay pit and a recycled lumber firm. But his vision is for the site to offer vocational training in a number of fields, including industrial machine tool work, environmental restoration, utility operations, and manufacture of shooting-related items such as clay pigeons.

Steve Christianson is the founder of The Water School, a private for-profit business that began operating at Minarets High School in Oneals in February.

The school expanded to a site at Jenny Lind Elementary School in Valley Springs this past summer.

The school offers a 13-month program that leads to certificates in water treatment and distribution. Students who then pass state licensing tests are eligible to seek water utility jobs that typically have starting pay ranging from \$18 to \$26 per hour, according to the school's website.

Among those enrolled at the Jenny Lind site are several Calaveras Unified School District employees responsible for operating water systems for the district.

Classes are meeting at the Jenny Lind site twice a month, although Christianson said he plans to increase that to weekly at some point. The school also makes use of online discussion and training.

"I'm highly cognizant of the fact that we need human interaction," he said.

Utility industry insiders say that people who study the trade online have a relatively low success rate in passing the state tests.

"I think it is a positive deal," Michael David Fischer, the general manager of Valley Springs Public Utility District, said of The Water School. "It is extremely hard to get training for young people who are interested in water and wastewater."

Fischer said that in the past, he's hired workers as trainees only to be forced to let them go when they were unable to pass the required state tests.

Fischer said his utility district is studying where to locate a new water treatment plant and that one of the sites being considered is Coe's property. If that would happen, it would put a working plant in a place where it could help train new generations of plant operators.

Fischer noted, however, that Coe's property is farther from the town than other sites being considered.

"It has to be one of those deals that is cost effective for my customers," Fischer said of Coe's proposal to make a water treatment plant part of the vocational training campus.

Christianson, meanwhile, said the Coe's generosity has made it possible to prepare to erect permanent classrooms for The Water School at the Coe Center.

And Coe continues to scout for other industries willing to share a campus where they could also be used for vocational education.

"There is a strong possibility that we might be having a slaughterhouse on the property," Coe said.

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On the Web

To learn more about the Water School, go to water-school.com.

To learn more about The Coe Center, go to facebook.com/pages/COE-Industrial-Technology-and-Education-Center/229142823768429.

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