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Kennedy lauds sewage plant's green setup

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TIGARD -- After years spent fighting sewage treatment plants in courtrooms across the country, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. had to come to Tigard to find one he could actually praise.

Kennedy was in town Wednesday to celebrate a public-private green business partnership that he believes could serve as a model for other treatment plants.

The environmental attorney -- and son of a political icon -- joined local government, agricultural and environmental representatives at the Durham Advanced Wastewater Treatment Facility, run by Washington County's Clean Water Services.

The sewage treatment plant, which Kennedy calls the best in North America, is the first in the U.S. to run part of its waste stream through special reactors that transform potentially damaging nutrients into environmentally friendly fertilizer, which is then sold commercially.

"I've probably sued more sewage plants than any attorney in North America," said Kennedy, who represents Riverkeepers groups nationwide. Half of the plants are struggling with phosphorus, a nutrient that feeds devastating algae blooms.

In many cases, phosphorus removal has been crushingly expensive, requiring costly aluminum sulfate and long-distance hauling, he said.

"I've sat across many negotiating tables from a mayor or a town supervisor, who say to me, 'Look, we have to choose between buying football helmets for our kids and musical instruments or (removing phosphorus),' " Kennedy said.

As a board member for Vantage Point, a green technology venture-capital firm, Kennedy learned about a company with a potential solution for those problems.

Ostara Nutrient Recovery Technologies of Vancouver, B.C., formed in 2005 to license and commercialize a phosphorous-removal technology developed at the University of British Columbia. Ostara connected with Clean Water Services at a conference in 2007 and began constructing a $2.5 million multi-reactor plant at the Durham facility last fall.

Under the previous sewage-treatment process, the Durham plant would squeeze water out of sludge, send the biosolids to fertilize crops in eastern Oregon and bring the phosphorous- and ammonia-filled water back to the plant for retreatment, said Rob Baur, operations analyst for Clean Water Services....