



Director of Operations





Shaping the Future of Water

Santa Margarita Water District (SMWD) is entering a new chapter of growth and renewal, marked by bold investments in infrastructure, technology, and long-term water reliability. The most recent Accomplishments Report underscores the District's commitment to transparency, financial responsibility, and a sustainable water future for nearly 250,000 residents.

This is an exciting moment for the organization—one that calls for leadership with both vision and execution. With the District actively advancing major initiatives—from modernizing treatment processes and expanding recycled water systems to leveraging smart technologies and improving asset management—the next Director of Operations has the unique opportunity to lead transformative change, enhance operational efficiency, and strengthen SMWD's reputation for excellence.

The right leader will bring fresh ideas, a forward-looking mindset, and the ability to translate strategy into action. By guiding a large and diverse operations team, collaborating across departments, and building on SMWD's foundation of transparency and accountability, the Director of Operations will help define the District's future and deliver essential infrastructure and services for decades to come.

The Position

The Santa Margarita Water District operates a complex utility system on behalf of its customers and regional partners. The District is responsible for the treatment and conveyance of potable water and recycled water, wastewater collection and treatment, and the operation of a large, regional water transmission pipeline—an uncommon combination that distinguishes SMWD from many other water agencies. This broad operational footprint, combined with significant infrastructure, regulatory oversight, and service expectations, makes SMWD's Operations function challenging, exciting, and rewarding for a high-impact leader.

Within this context, the Director of Operations oversees the District's largest and most multifaceted department, which includes three core areas of responsibility: Collections & Distributions, Water & Wastewater Treatment, and Equipment Maintenance. Reporting to the General Manager's Office, this position provides leadership for approximately 100 employees; develops, manages, and monitors an annual operating budget of nearly \$100 million; and works directly with Engineering to help strategize and develop the capital improvement program to ensure operational needs and long-term infrastructure priorities are fully integrated into project scope, scheduling, and resource allocation.

The Director provides strategic leadership for all operational functions, including the operation and maintenance of water treatment plants, potable and recycled water distribution systems, wastewater collection and treatment facilities, fleet and equipment maintenance, and emergency response activities. The role ensures safe, reliable, and efficient operations while meeting rigorous regulatory requirements, environmental standards, and performance expectations.

As a key member of the General Manager's leadership team, the Director plays a pivotal role in shaping organizational strategy, advancing major initiatives, and strengthening cross-department collaboration. The position provides expert guidance to senior leadership, managers, staff, and the Board of Directors on complex operational, regulatory, and infrastructure matters, and represents the District with regulatory agencies, industry partners, community organizations, and other public entities.

This is a highly visible leadership opportunity for an accomplished operational strategist who has led large, complex utility systems and is motivated by delivering essential water, wastewater, and recycled water services at scale.

The Priorities

The next Director of Operations will help guide SMWD through a period of rebuilding and organizational evolution. Early priorities will focus on strengthening organizational alignment, enhancing operational effectiveness, and fostering a stable and positive culture within the department. Key areas of focus include:

- **Engage and collaborate** closely with the leadership team to foster a culture of trust, innovation, safety, and shared accountability.
- **Align operational goals** with the District's strategic direction and service commitments.
- **Implement recommendations** from the upcoming operational assessment, including improvements to staffing, systems, and policies.
- **Strengthen succession planning** by assessing the bench, developing talent, and recruiting to fill key gaps.
- **Build and support a cohesive team** as new employees join and existing staff step into expanded roles.
- **Shape a positive, stable culture** that brings clarity, consistency, and confidence to the department.
- **Provide steady leadership** that strengthens the organization and positions the department for long-term success.



The Successful Candidate

The successful candidate is a visionary, people-centered leader who brings both strong operational expertise and a modern mindset to the District's Operations Department. This individual blends strategic thinking with practical execution skills and thrives in a collaborative, service-driven environment.

The ideal candidate is a forward-thinking, strategic leader who brings a clear personal vision that is translated into practical, actionable plans. Someone who knows when to lead decisively and when to listen, adapt, and follow to achieve the best outcomes for the organization. This individual will bring a global outlook, embracing new approaches—from advanced water treatment initiatives to modernized asset management, and provide steady, consistent direction that keeps staff informed, aligned, and engaged.

This leader is kind, empathetic, self-reflective, and grounded in emotional intelligence, with practical insight and sound judgment shaped by real-world experience. They cultivate trust, maintain a positive outlook, and value collaboration over command-and-control approaches (although they are not afraid to make decisions and implement them). With authenticity and approachability, they empower teams, foster growth, and create an inclusive environment where employees feel supported and connected to the District's mission.

A strong manager and confident decision maker, the ideal candidate brings backbone and a "can-do" mentality. They are comfortable voicing informed opinions, setting expectations, holding teams accountable, and balancing strategic thinking with hands-on problem solving. Technically knowledgeable across water, wastewater, treatment, and regulatory operations, they excel at simplifying complex concepts for internal and external stakeholders.

Innovative, flexible, and adaptable, this individual leverages new technologies, challenges outdated assumptions, and brings a private-sector approach that values efficiency, continuous improvement, and customer service. They collaborate effectively across the organization to align daily operations with long-term infrastructure needs and support implementation of the General Manager's vision while contributing thoughtful insights.



Qualifications

The District seeks candidates who can demonstrate both breadth and depth of professional experience, which may be evidenced through a combination of relevant education and progressively responsible leadership in complex water or wastewater operations. A typical way is graduation from an accredited four-year college or university with a major in business or public administration, life sciences, engineering, or a closely related field, and at least 10 years of progressively responsible experience managing the operations or maintenance functions in a wastewater or water treatment agency, at least five of which were at a manager level. Requisite certifications or a professional engineering license are required.

Inside Santa Margarita Water District

The Santa Margarita Water District (SMWD) was formed in 1964 as a landowner district (Section 35306 of the California Water Code) by ranchers seeking to create a reliable water source for their cattle and the growing community. The District now provides high-quality, reliable drinking water, recycled water, and wastewater services to nearly 250,000 South Orange County, California residents. The service area includes 10 unique communities, including the cities of Mission Viejo, Rancho Santa Margarita, and San Juan Capistrano, and the unincorporated communities of Coto de Caza, Las Flores, Ladera Ranch, the Rancho Mission Viejo Villages of Sendero, Esencia and Rienda, and Talega in San Clemente. The District is governed by a five-member Board of Directors, with each elected by the public to represent a specific division, and has a total annual operating budget for FY 2025-26 of \$131M. As one of the region's largest and most impactful utilities, SMWD is committed to the highest standards of transparency, innovation, and environmental stewardship.

The District employs approximately 255 full-time staff and operates with one represented employee association. People are the foundation of the District's progress, innovation, and success. A collaborative, human-centered culture fosters camaraderie, purpose, and genuine enjoyment in meaningful work. Across the organization, talented teams partner closely to advance SMWD's mission and tackle challenges together, creating a strong sense of unity not often found in government agencies.

Santa Margarita Water District's values include:

- Exemplary service excellence
- Intelligent innovation that is forward-thinking and adaptive
- Ethical fiscal responsibility and transparency
- Environmental and resource stewardship
- Employee development and leadership training
- Building relationships that strengthen communities

Quick Facts

- 250 Facilities
- 2,000 Miles of Pipeline
- 9,000 Acre-Feet of Recycled Water Reservoirs
- 3 Advanced Wastewater Treatment Plants
- 1 Groundwater Treatment Plant
- Industry First Advanced Recycled Water Treatment Plant





Compensation

The expected hiring range is \$211,159 – \$291,084 (pending final Board approval). The starting salary will be negotiated based on the candidate's experience and qualifications. The salary will be supported by an attractive benefits package including:

- **CalPERS Retirement:** The Classic members' formula is 2.7% at 55 with an employee contribution of 8%, while Public Employees' Pension Reform Act (PEPRA) members have a formula of 2% at 62 with an employee contribution of 7.5%.
- **Medical:** Multiple plans, including PPO and HMO options, are available. The District pays 100% of the cost for the employee's coverage (not to exceed the amount of the highest HMO plan); the District will additionally contribute 50% of the premium cost for dependents.
- **Dental Insurance:** Both HMO and PPO plans are available. The District covers the employee at 100%, regardless of the selected plan; dependent coverage is available at the District's rates.
- **Vision Insurance:** The District offers a Vision Service Plan (VSP) and pays the full cost for employees and their dependents.
- **Life Insurance:** A term life insurance benefit is provided.
- **Paid Time Off:** The District has a generous combined program for time off, with a typical starting accrual rate of 140 hours annually, which increases with years of service.
- **Holidays:** The District observes 11½ holidays per year.
- **Social Security:** The District does not pay into Social Security and provides a private disability program at no cost to the employees.
- **Other Benefits:** Other employee benefit programs are available, including deferred compensation with partial matching and a flexible spending program for medical expenses.



How to Apply

Become part of an innovative organization shaping the future of water through teamwork, creativity, and a strong commitment to community and environmental stewardship. Applications will be accepted electronically by Raftelis at raftelis.com. Candidates will complete a brief online form and upload a cover letter and resume. For full consideration, please submit your application by **Friday, February 13, 2026**.



Questions

For more information or questions regarding Santa Margarita Water District or the Director of Operations position, contact Serena Wright-Black at swrightblack@raftelis.com or Robert Colichio at rcolichio@raftelis.com.