



Ridgeline development foes throw down the gauntlet

BY MIKE ROBERTS
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Where's Bill Parker? That was one of the questions raised last week by Serrano neighbors at the inaugural meeting of BARD, the Block Asbestos Ridge Development committee.

About 80 mostly Serrano residents crowded into the Holiday Inn conference room on Jan. 28 to hear the group's leaders explain their concerns, and outline their strategy to block the development of the ridge east of El Dorado Hills Boulevard.

The group is concerned that their families will be exposed to asbestos fibers unearthed by grading on the ridge.

"We don't begrudge Mr. Parker the right to make a profit," said Seth Flexo, who moderated the meeting. "We share in his vision of this master planned community, and encourage him to come to the table and help preserve the reputation he's worked so hard to establish."

Thus far, Parker has not accepted the group's invitation to meet. Nonetheless, Flexo was optimistic. "We're confident that Mr. Parker will ultimately do the right thing."

Flexo described the group as concerned neighbors and friends who respect their community leaders, "not crazy activists."

Oak Ridge lies in the middle of the western Bear Mountain fault, which runs from Jamestown to Oroville, and contains high densities of several forms of asbestos, including tremolite with long thin fibers that lodge in the lungs and can cause cancer years later.

The ridge rises west above Serrano Village D. It can be seen from El Dorado Hills Boulevard above the archery range and the northern portion of the former golf course.

Flexo called the health risk of stirring up the asbestos on the ridge "overwhelming," especially to children. He called for the county to assist Parker to relocate the 135 home development, inside Serrano or elsewhere.



Serrano's 20-year-old environmental impact report, which makes no reference to asbestos, is the group's immediate target. They'd like to see it updated to address the toxicity of the site.

The group also wants the county to re-evaluate Air Quality Management District Regulation 223, which specifies dust mitigation measures whenever 20 or more yards of hazardous soil are moved. They want to see additional safeguards when tremolite asbestos is present.

Asbestos expert Wayne Berman, who has worked for the county and Serrano, told the media in 2005 that amphibole fibers, which include tremolite, are 700 to 800 times more hazardous for mesothelioma and lung cancer combined than the chrysotile asbestos used in the workplace.

Geologist Sean Fitzgerald addressed the group by speaker-phone as an occurring asbestos and the tremolite vein in El Dorado Hills.

Fitzgerald said the CARB 435 testing method, which has become the standard California protocol to test for naturally occurring asbestos in soil, understates asbestos levels. The procedure tests about 1 pint of soil per half acre, he said, and involves grinding the soil so that many of the fibers are too small to be detected by a conventional "light" microscope.

He advocates more thorough sampling, and insists an electron microscope is required to properly detect the fibers, which are so small that a cluster of 2 million looks like a dust particle, barely visible to the naked eye.

Fitzgerald's accompanying slide show included a 1998 photo of the ridge-cut exposed during the grading for Oak Ridge High School's soccer field that revealed a visible white vein of Tremolite asbestos. "That's what you have in that ridge," he said, "at various depths."

"These particles disburse very easily," he said. "The more you disturb it, the more it becomes airborne, and the more they travel. Very low concentrations can cause significant exposure."

Fitzgerald likened Serrano residents' exposure risk to the carcinogenic effect of second hand smoke. "We're looking at mesothelioma rates going from one in 100,000 to one in 10,000," he said.



Nadine Lauren explained how the tiny tremolite fibers lodge in the lung permanently, eventually scarring the lung tissue and often progressing to mesothelioma, a fatal cancer. Fifty percent of those diagnosed die within one year, she said. The process takes 20 to 50 years, she added, which puts children at a much higher risk.

"If people got sick and died right away, we wouldn't be having this conversation," said Fitzgerald from the speaker phone. "It's amazing how little people know, and how little they want to know."

Lauren said the toxicity of tremolite asbestos is not addressed in the county's regulation 223, and called the dust mitigation procedures "unproven," especially when left up to multiple builders and their subcontractors.

"Who's going to ensure compliance?" she asked. "We've all seen construction crews working on windy days around here."

"Scientists come here from all over the world to study this place," said Carla McMorris. "We're asking the county to acknowledge the health risk of developing an area which contains one of the largest veins of Tremolite asbestos in the world."

McMorris recapped BARD's three-pronged strategy to block the ridgeline development:

- Relocation — asking the county and Parker Development to find another place to put the 135 homes.
- Legal — challenging Serrano's 20-year old environmental impact report and the Air Quality Management District's dust mitigation regulation as inadequate for sites containing high densities of tremolite asbestos. The group has hired an environmental attorney, and is selecting medical and geological experts to testify when the time comes. "That's what it's going to take to get the county to listen to us," said McMorris.
- Communication and outreach — The group is committed to becoming a clearinghouse for information about the dangers of naturally occurring asbestos. "What we're discussing here is very disturbing," said McMorris, "but not talking about it won't make it go away."

The challenge, said McMorris, is that Parker Development has done a spectacular job with Serrano. "The county loves the way they do their projects, and the tax revenue they generate."



That's why the project is being "rubber stamped," in Placerville, she said, adding that without quick action bulldozers would be on the ridge by summer.

Serrano's development agreement is set to expire in February, which is why Parker Development is moving forward now, despite the down economy. The project could be heard by the El Dorado County Planning Commission as early as March.

The group is seeking donations to offset their expenses. BARD's Website is www.bardedh.ning.com.

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