



Tuesday, April 13, 2004

Digging for answers from EPA

By Ryan Rose

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Ryan Rose/THE Telegraph EPA work crews paved over possibly hazardous soil at Oak Ridge High School during Spring break.

Call it a line in the sand at Oak Ridge High School.

El Dorado County Superintendent of Schools Dr. Vicki Barber is searching for motives behind the massive asbestos cleanup at Oak Ridge High School.

At last Wednesday's El Dorado Hills chamber luncheon, Barber asked why El Dorado Hills is getting so much attention from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"There is no question that we are concerned for the safety of the students, staff and community," said Barber. "But at the same time, we have a number of questions coming from parents and community groups."

The questions have only increased in number since January, when the EPA announced their intention to conduct a massive soil cleanup on the campus. The course of action was determined after soil tests, conducted in November of 2003 at the request of the El Dorado Union High School District, yielded positive results for hazardous levels of asbestos.

Initially, the EPA instructed school officials to begin mitigation efforts. Although able to remedy the baseball and softball fields before the spring sports season, the district spent \$1.6 million, but found further efforts fiscally unmanageable. At the district's request, the EPA is paying for additional projects.

Not denying the EPA's helpfulness, or dedication, Barber says she, and others, are questioning whether the EPA's large-scale assault on the Oak Ridge campus is necessary.

Barber and Oak Ridge High School Principal Tom Gemma question whether the EPA can judge what level of asbestos is harmful. If all levels are harmful, Barber says, then all of El Dorado Hills, and much of El Dorado County, have unhealthy levels of asbestos.

According to Mark Merchant of the EPA's Office of Planning and Public Affairs, the EPA does have a marker and the results from the November testing "legally obligated" the agency to remedy the situation.

EPA officials also pointed out that Oak Ridge High School was not being held to unusual standards and tests.

While Barber claimed 44 out of 58 counties have asbestos issues and do not receive as much attention as Oak Ridge High School, Jere Johnson of the EPA's site assessment team said that the EPA is equally as focused on other sites. He pointed to recent mitigation efforts underway in the Bay Area city of Alviso and the central valley town of Coalinga.

"Oak Ridge High School and El Dorado Hills are receiving the focus because of community concerns surrounding the asbestos contamination that resulted from construction of the soccer fields at Oak Ridge and the potential that similar geologic conditions may exist in the vicinity," said Johnson.

Merchant adds that of the 44 counties that have asbestos issues, few of them have witnessed the land development occurring in west El Dorado County. Johnson stressed the EPA is simply providing a service requested by the people.

“EPA has received a petition to do an assessment of other public areas in the El Dorado Hills vicinity,” said Johnson. “We are currently determining the scope of the assessment.”

While test sites are still unknown, Merchant said Silva Valley Elementary School and Rolling Hills Middle School are under consideration.

Johnson said the EPA has no testing planned for the Bass Lake Park site despite requests from Bass Lake Action Committee, a group of local residents encouraging responsible development.

Merchant also said the EPA would never consider placing air monitors on students - even if they volunteered. Johnson said the EPA might use personal air monitors, but only on “environmental contractors working for EPA.”

Yet, Barber says she is exercising “healthy skepticism.”

“With the number of agencies involved in the cleanup, it is hard to get direct answers. I have received different information at different times,” she said.

Without confirmation of who will pay for the work, Barber is concerned that every job the EPA wants to do may cost the district later, which will hurt students in the end.

It is unknown whether or not the EPA will seek reimbursement for work already completed. Merchant said that, as part of a “legal formality” the EPA would “ask” for reimbursement, but stressed the EPA was not in the business of “bankrupting schools.”

Barber says she would like to see that in writing.

Phase One of the cleanup ended April 10 after six days of work on the high school campus. EPA On-Scene Coordinator Dan Suter said crews re-covered walkways and paved exposed patches of earth.

Crews will return June 1 for the second phase during which EPA contractors will cover the remaining exposed areas.