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El Dorado residents oppose housing in asbestos area

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Dozens of residents in the landmark Serrano development of El Dorado Hills are lining up against a proposal to build 135 homes on a ridge that bears a particularly toxic form of asbestos.

The united front represents the first organized opposition to construction in Sierra foothills asbestos deposits, after 10 years of public health warnings.

Carving roads, utility trenches and building pads into Oak Ridge is bound to release breathable asbestos fibers into the air, potentially contaminating neighborhoods and schools downwind, according to geologists and environmental health experts who have studied the area.

Some of the digging would take place just over residents' back fences and near sports fields at Oak Ridge High School, which takes its name from the proposed housing site.

The main public health concern is mesothelioma, an inoperable and almost always fatal cancer of the membranes lining the chest and other body cavities. Breathing the type of asbestos commonly found around Oak Ridge can be enough to trigger the disease, though it typically takes 20 to 30 years for the cancer to take hold, according to several health studies.

Children are especially at risk because of their long life expectancy.

Nadine Lauren, a leader of the opposition group, counts 23 children among her dozen closest neighbors on Meadow Wood Drive.

"My concern is 100 percent about health risk, most importantly to my kids," said Lauren, who helped enlist many of the 70-plus Serrano residents in the group, Block Asbestos Ridge Development.

Controls have worked

Many Serrano residents find their gated, oak-shaded "villages" much safer and saner than congested cities they left downhill in the Bay Area and Sacramento County. And the creator of this suburban refuge – Parker Development Co. – insists it will stay that way.

El Dorado County's asbestos dust controls have already proved adequate on construction sites elsewhere in Serrano, and they will work just as well on Oak Ridge, said Kirk Bone, the company's director of governmental affairs.

"We are confident that the regulatory framework works to protect the public," Bone said.

Several California communities are laced with asbestos veins. The fibrous minerals, best known for their decades of use as a fire retardant, are commonly found near earthquake faults in foothills of the Coast Range, the Klamath Mountains and the Sierra Nevada.

While other areas may contain more asbestos, none has drawn more attention from health experts and regulators than El Dorado Hills, a bedroom community of 43,000.

"We are not aware of any other place in the state where you have this convergence of rapid development and large-scale disturbance of tremolite-bearing terrain," the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Dan Meer told The Bee in 2005, following a study he supervised of the community's busiest recreational park.

EPA testing showed everyday activities – playing baseball or riding a bike – kick up a particularly toxic kind of asbestos fibers called amphibole, specifically its tremolite and actinolite varieties.

A more potent asbestos

Most lung disease experts consider amphibole asbestos at least 100 times more potent than the more prevalent commercially used chrysotile fibers in causing mesothelioma.

EPA testing was one of several government and university studies stemming from a 1998 Sacramento Bee investigation of asbestos in western El Dorado County.

The reports spurred California to ban the sale of serpentine road gravel, which often contains asbestos, and prompted the first nationwide mapping of asbestos outcrops as potential cancer hazards. The state subsequently imposed special dust controls on construction and mining in areas likely to contain the minerals.

Local planning departments also added asbestos to their screening of proposed developments, and real estate agents began disclosing the potential hazard.

Development in asbestos zones has continued with little opposition from local residents.

Until now.

Opposition emerges

Discontent sprouted in November, after Parker Development informed residents of Serrano's 369-unit "Village D1" – a resurrected 1997 plan to carve lots for 65 custom homes along the crest of Oak Ridge, just west of their subdivision. In a letter, the company said it also had applied for county approval to plow a separate tract for an additional 70 homes on the ridge.

"My husband said, 'Did you read this?' " Carla McMorris recalled.

The couple bought their home in 2000, believing Parker had killed the ridge project because of asbestos concerns, McMorris said.

Her neighbor, Lauren, said she also was surprised and became agitated.

"I thought they had already made the decision not to develop it," Lauren said.

Parker officials said they had "voluntarily delayed" the development in 1998 because "there was much discussion and debate, but not much understanding" of the potential asbestos hazard, Bone says in the letter to residents.

Bone said the company does not expect to break ground "for several years."

Even so, Lauren, McMorris and others are quickly organizing.

Lauren gathered neighbors to solicit the backing of their homeowners' association, only to learn that three of the five association directors work for the developer.

"We felt really dissed for (them) not taking us seriously," McMorris said. "That meeting was an eye-opener for us."

Bone, who sits on the association board, said the residents got a generous hearing.

"We took an hour out of our time to listen," he told The Bee.

What they saw as a cold reception prompted residents to form their own group, which now counts among its leaders an accountant, a public relations consultant and a state lobbyist: George Miller, son of veteran Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez.

Less than 2 months old, the group already has hired a lawyer to help navigate the regulatory terrain and an expert in sampling and analyzing asbestos fibers, said Seth Flexo, a leader in the campaign.

"We're pretty happy with what we have gotten so far," Flexo said of residents' financial contributions.

The group has about a year before El Dorado County planners are expected to review Parker's Oak Ridge proposal.

Improved asbestos controls

Ten years ago, when Parker pulled the plug on the ridge project, less was known about the hazards of disturbing naturally occurring asbestos. Regulation mainly addressed demolition and renovation of buildings insulated with asbestos.

What Parker Development needed, Bone told The Bee last week, was government direction on digging in areas geologists have identified as likely to contain the minerals.

In those zones, local air pollution regulators now require special dust controls when crews excavate for housing, roads and backyard swimming pools. Wetting the soil, covering unearthed material, installing windscreens and washing tires on construction vehicles are typically required.

Parker's county-approved asbestos precautions include air monitors strapped on excavation workers and air samplers on the perimeter of work sites.

A consultant hired by the residents group said these safeguards go beyond what the law requires but nonetheless are inadequate, given the magnitude of asbestos and excavation proposed at Oak Ridge.

"It's a recipe for disaster," said Sean Fitzgerald, a North Carolina minerals analyst who discovered tremolite asbestos a few years ago in an Oak Ridge High School soccer field under construction.

"They're talking about running bulldozers through an asbestos vein that runs the length of the ridge," Fitzgerald said. "The less you mess with that vein, the smarter you are."

Residents opposing the ridge projects said they would have no quarrel with the development but for the asbestos, which they believe would escape the job site no matter how stringent the dust control.

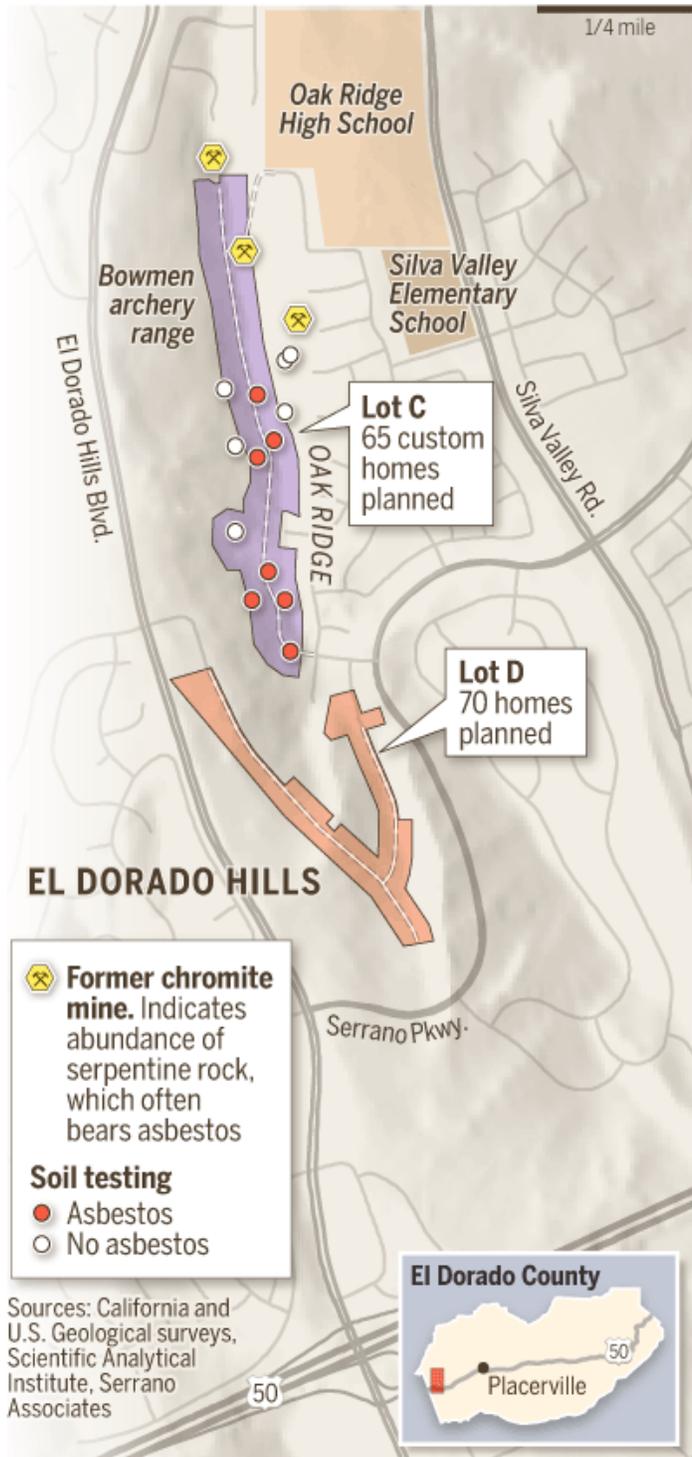
Said Flexo: "We don't begrudge Parker for wanting to develop land and make a profit. Just do it where you don't jeopardize the health and safety of children."

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CONTESTED DEVELOPMENT

An El Dorado Hills developer proposes to carve two subdivisions into rock and soil bearing a particularly toxic type of asbestos.



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School's out at Silva Elementary. The El Dorado Hills school lies below Oak Ridge, where a plan to build 135 homes has galvanized neighborhood opposition for fear that toxic asbestos could be released during excavation and construction.



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Seth Flexo, a leader in the campaign to deep-six the plan to build 135 homes on Oak Ridge, plays with his 3-year-old daughter, Ella; Oak Ridge forms a backdrop. Flexo says his Serrano neighbors have hired an asbestos expert and a lawyer to help navigate the regulatory terrain. The group has about a year before El Dorado County planners are expected to review the plan.