



Asbestos creeps back into the spotlight

BY MIKE ROBERTS
Village Life staff writer

Naturally occurring asbestos in El Dorado Hills is the dark spot on the X-ray. Hopefully benign, possibly deadly, it just won't go away.

In 1997 naturally occurring asbestos was discovered in the community and has stirred up periodic debate ever since.

The latest chapter involves Parker Development's plans for 65 custom lots on "Oak Ridge," which forms a natural boundary between Serrano and the archery range above El Dorado Hills Boulevard. Parker would like to proceed with the buildout of the award-winning community which has defined El Dorado Hills in many ways.

Conflicting reports from the EPA, R.J. Lee and the U.S. Geological Survey, plus 10 years of on-and-off asbestos media scare stories have left most El Dorado Hills residents unconvinced that the soil they live on is dangerous, and unsure what they'd do about it if it is. Others are concerned that the asbestos in some areas could be a deadly prescription for their children.

The young science around the definition and dangers of asbestos, coupled with latencies for asbestos-related diseases that stretch to 30 years or more, make the problem particularly vexing.

Project opponents were frustrated last week when the ridgetop project earned conditional support from the El Dorado Hills Area Planning Advisory Council (APAC), and also the El Dorado Hills Community Services District, which blessed the project from an open space and tree management perspective.

Local officials and developers acknowledge the potential dangers, but quietly claim the community became a test case for reactionary environmentalists.

They also contend a project-hungry EPA fresh off the explosive Libby, Mont., asbestos case, and obstructionist NIMBYs made the situation appear more dangerous than the science could prove.

The most recent government study, a 2006 U.S. Geological Survey report, confirmed that California's West Bear Mountain fault, which runs along Oak Ridge, contains



amphibole asbestos fibers known as tremolite - long, thin strands that, when inhaled, tend to wedge in the lungs and are a known carcinogen, even at low exposure levels.

Serrano's own tests also confirm the presence of "actionable" levels of tremolite on the ridge.

The parcel, known as "Lot C," and its southward sister, "Lot D," were included in Serrano's specific plan and development agreement approved by the county in 1997.

The projects were put on hold in 1998 after asbestos was discovered at Oak Ridge High School. In 2005 the county Air Quality Management District adopted rules for grading and excavating hazardous soils, and controlling the potentially harmful dust during grading and excavation.

Facing the expiration of their development agreement in February 2009 Serrano resubmitted the two projects to the county, but according to Kirk Bone, Serrano's director of governmental relations, construction will not begin for at least two years.

Opponents challenged Bone during the Jan. 14 APAC meeting. "You've given us no indication that you give a you-know-what about our health and safety," said Serrano resident Nadine Lauren, whose property backs up to the parcel. Lauren has emerged as the spokesperson for the opposition.

APAC members, concerned about the view from El Dorado Hills Boulevard, questioned Lot C's ridgeline road. Tom Howard, Serrano's vice president of construction, explained that the homes would be nestled in the trees beneath the ridge and promised "you won't see the road."

One of the advantages of putting the road on the ridgetop, he said, is that only five to six acres of soil would have to be displaced, all of which could be used onsite.

Lauren objected. "So you're going to disturb six acres of soil, potentially releasing tremolite fibers that are 700 to 800 times more hazardous than the asbestos used in the workplace, and dump it right back onto the ridge."

Lauren was also incredulous that Serrano's Dust Mitigation Plan indicates no blasting will be required. "I had to blast just to build a tiny pool in my back yard," she said. "You are saying that you won't have to do any blasting to build that road up there? What about the lots?"



The county Air Quality Management District requires a work stoppage whenever visible dust in a hazardous area exceeds 25 feet or crosses the property line. There are no exceptions for blasting. When explosives are required, they suggest prewetting the area and using water fog, soil mounds and blast mats to contain fugitive dust.

Serrano's dust mitigation and air monitoring plans for Lot C's roads, utilities and sidewalks were approved in February 2008. Separate plans will be required of each lot owner for all grading and excavation for the structures, landscape and pools.

Bone defended the project to the council members. "We waited 10 years, and missed the greatest boom market in the history of real estate waiting for the asbestos issue to settle itself out," he said. "The EPA has come and gone. They concluded that the [county Air Quality Management District] needs to handle this. The rules have been in place for a while now and as near as we can tell they work. We intend to fully comply with them. I don't know what more we can do." "Don't build on it!" Lauren shouted from the back of the room.

Serrano's environmental impact report was completed in 1988, prior to the discovery of asbestos. The Air Quality Management District's fugitive dust provisions serve as legal mitigation of the environmental impacts of the asbestos, so Serrano is not required to resubmit its EIR.

Vicki Summers, a long-time member of the Asbestos Community Advisory Board, said she wants to see an updated EIR. The presence of asbestos constitutes "new and significant information that wasn't revealed in the past."

"We have the most deadly type of asbestos on that ridge," she said, citing asbestos research conducted by British Mineralogist John Addison on animals. Addison found tremolite fibers collected 70 miles southeast of El Dorado Hills in Jamestown, along the same fault that runs through El Dorado Hills, caused cancer in rats.

"There's also research that shows that the closer you live to this stuff the more dangerous it is," Summers said, referring to a study by UC Davis health science researcher Marc Schenker. The 2005 study correlated the risk of developing malignant mesothelioma with residential proximity to naturally occurring asbestos.

"There must be other areas of Serrano that you could build on," she said.



APAC Chairman John Hidahl picked up the theme, asking Bone if he could leave the ridge as open space and put houses in one of Serrano's open space areas with less asbestos exposure.

The problem, said Bone, is that "open space is always next to someone." He added, "If we do anything outside our specific plan, the county will enforce the 2004 General Plan and you'd end up with a much denser project."

APAC member Jeff Haberman pointed out that "he only logical place to put this many homes is on the [defunct El Dorado Hills] golf course," and asked if that was their intention.

Bone denied any hidden golf course development agenda. He said the community might see a separate proposal for the empty links by year-end.

Tough environmental decisions

"These are the tough environmental decisions," said Serrano resident Carla McMorris. "Sometimes the right decision today is unfair to those who made good decisions 10 years ago. This is your chance to show us how you represent this community."

Bone countered that the "tough environmental decision" would put many more homes on the ridge. "These densities are about half what they should be, given the fact that road, water and sewer will be in place," he said. Under California's greenhouse gas reduction measures "infill projects like this are supposed to be much denser, and also contain affordable housing."

Concern about contractors

APAC member John Sorensen said he was confident Serrano would comply with the dust mitigation measures for construction of the road, sidewalks and utility trenches on the ridge, but worried that homeowners, individual grading contractors, landscapers and pool companies might be less diligent.

Bone acknowledged Sorensen's concern, and promised, "Whatever rules you guys want imposed, we will make sure that the next guy complies, because we aren't going anywhere. We're comfortable that we can proceed forward with this project in a safe way."



The majority of APAC members present approved a motion supporting the project with some additional soil testing and better public notification. Jeff Haberman and John Sorensen opposed support of the project.

APAC's support is strictly advisory, a warm-up lap for the hurdles of the county planning process. The project will need approvals all the way to the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors, and may face legal challenges after that. Lauren and her friends said they'd be there every step of the way, asking the hard questions.

mroberts@villagelife.com