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For residents next door, coastal propane yard poses risk

By Kaitlyn Bartley 6 hrs ago

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A veritable sea of used propane tanks is now parked on the Coastside near a residential area.
John Green / Review

Pillar Ridge resident Jose Tamez's backyard behind his mobile home abuts the propane tank yard along Airport Road. And from his rooftop he can easily survey the entire space.

When he first started keeping track, the retired medical social worker counted 42 tanks in the yard. The last time he counted, it was up to 150, "and I think there are more now," he said.

Many of the tanks scattered across the yard are empty with unscrewed valves, and Pillar Ridge residents have called the Coastside Fire Protection District to report what smells to them like gas leaks. It's usually just lingering fumes from empty tanks, but Tamez worries.

"My biggest concern is if there's an explosion, most of these houses have families with babies and children," he said. "If the big tank went off, this house would be incinerated."

A lone cigarette could ignite a leak, he fears. Or a plane crash, like the one that occurred nearby in November, could cause an explosion. "If that plane had stayed aloft another minute, it would have hit the yard," he

said.

Tamez isn't alone in his concerns. Other residents of the Pillar Ridge Manufactured Home Community worry about the hazard the yard poses, including Midcoast Community Councilwoman Lisa Ketcham and the community's property manager Paul Bowman. They would like to see the tanks moved somewhere away from residents, or the yard downsized to contain fewer tanks.

Compounding their concerns is the fact that the Big Wave development, including a wellness center to house developmentally disabled adults, is slated for construction next door to the tank yard. But a fix that satisfies all parties seems remote at this point.

Aerial photos from the 1960s to the 1990s show the parcel empty except for two storage tanks away from the mobile homes on the adjacent lot. In the 2000s, the business was sold several times, and photos show more and larger tanks accumulating closer to the homes next door. The facility is now operated by Amerigas.

In 2004, Pillar Ridge residents got their first serious notice about the risk next door. Residents were in the process of having the mobile home community sold to a nonprofit, and applied for federally funded grants to pay for housing upgrades. But the proximity of propane tanks to the mobile homes meant the funds couldn't be approved.

"The existing stationary propane tank has the capacity of containing 15,000 gallons of propane fuel. (Housing and Urban Development) charts show a catastrophic accident would result in a 250-foot fire width and height," wrote the consulting environmental planner in his review of the site. "Any building within 180 feet would be combustible and any person within 900 feet could sustain major burns. Explosion blast overpressure for buildings and people within 560 feet would be life-threatening.

"In the event of an explosion, since there are mobile homes as close as 75 feet from the stationary tank, most of the park would be subjected to explosive and or thermal radiation."

The issue came up again in 2015 when the Big Wave development was being negotiated. The plan placed the wellness center at the north end of the parcel, roughly 200 feet from the propane yard property line, according to county planner Summer Burlison.

At that time, Big Wave developers promised to work with the county to address concerns regarding the propane yard, potentially by trading land and moving the propane yard to the south parcel of the Big Wave development, away from the wellness center and Pillar Ridge. The development's conditions also required that it not alter natural drainage from the upslope propane facility so that the gas, which is heavier than air, wouldn't be deflected toward Pillar Ridge. Representatives for Big Wave did not respond to the Review's request for comment.

Meanwhile, San Mateo County determined that the propane yard's expansions had occurred without the required permit, and that Amerigas was required to apply for a Coastal Development Permit.

"Expansions of the propane facility after April 1981, as evidenced by historic aerial imagery, constitute development subject to a Coastal Development Permit," wrote Summer Burlison, a county planner, in a 2015 letter to the propane company.

"The county has no record of the issuance of a CDP for the expansion," she wrote. Burlison also wrote that the expanded use of the site does not meet the criteria for a CDP exemption, and questioned the parcel's intensified use as "objectionable from the standpoint of odor, smoke, gas, and or noise." The county also requested that Amerigas pay \$7,300 in filing fees.

But, so far, neither a land swap nor a permit appears to be on the horizon. r

"Amerigas has been searching for options to relocate the facility elsewhere, including the South Big Wave Parcel," wrote Burlison. "However, they have recently informed us that they've not been successful in their pursuit, and so will continue to pursue a (coastal development permit) or exemption."

Amerigas has not yet filed a permit with the county, and could only qualify for an exemption if they propose to scale back operations to their original state, Burlison said.

"We're working diligently and cooperatively with the county to explore various options for the storage site," said Kate Stickel, director of communications for Amerigas. Stickel said that Amerigas had explored the possibility of a land swap with Big Wave, "but after multiple discussions with them, the parties agreed that the option wasn't going to

work and we're not going to explore it any further." Stickel said the companies were concerned that the land swap would involve a major permitting process that would take time and money, and there was no guarantee that a permit would be granted. Stickel said no decision had been made yet about whether to downsize the number of tanks in the yard, "but we will make sure to be compliant with all permits."

While they wait for a solution, residents continue to be concerned. The frequent smell of gas from empty tanks being means that a real gas leak might go ignored until it's too late, they say. The de-valve work and accompanying gas fumes causes unnecessary alarm when a false positive gas leak is smelled, wrote Pillar Ridge resident manager Bowman in a letter to San Mateo County Supervisor Don Horsley in 2015.

"Most seriously, it has lulled many citizens into complacency about smelling the gas leak odorant to the point where they no longer feel it important to report a gas leak. This is unacceptable." Horsley was unavailable to comment.

"Ideally, I would like the propane yard to move somewhere else," said the MCC's Ketcham. "If this was an affluent community they wouldn't put up with that."