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AmeriGas to remove propane tanks in Princeton

By Sara Hayden 16 hrs ago

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People on the Midcoast want to see any remaining propane tanks disappear from a storage facility run by Amerigas. Jame Soja / Review

On Friday, the San Mateo County Planning and Building Department issued a citation to national propane corporation AmeriGas for lack of timely removal of unpermitted tanks from a storage facility along Airport Road. The company removed the tanks on Tuesday.

“It needs to happen yesterday before someone gets killed,” Midcoast Community Council member Chris Johnson said.

“We’re fully cooperating with staff and moving this forward,” assured land-use planner Charles Eadie, working as a consultant for AmeriGas to ensure it complies with county standards.

He noted that it’s statistically more likely for someone to be hit by lightning than suffer some consequence in a propane accident. But for some neighbors, recent scares hit too close to home. Some residences are just 75 feet away from the tank facility.

“(There was) a lot of danger for me, and a lot of danger for my children ... It’s dangerous for everyone,” a mother of three complained.

Propane tank removal was slow because a limited number of licensed specialists were available to do the job, Eadie said. Council members speculated it was because the site — which is located near affordable housing including the Pillar Ridge Manufactured Home Community and pending Big Wave development that would serve adults with special needs — had been conveniently overlooked.

“This is socioeconomic exploitation,” Johnson said at a council meeting. “This needs to be fixed immediately, and it would be if it were somewhere else.”

Council member Brandon Kwan had a similar sentiment.

“I’m appalled that this got out of hand. There are no excuses. I think because it’s unincorporated, people didn’t pay that much attention to us, so things happened. You can see the way Princeton just ended up ... like a junkyard,” he said.

Eadie countered that the site had been legally permitted for propane tank storage since the 1960s and the impact on people living in affordable housing was inadvertent. In fact, the storage facility was originally installed in part to serve the community before other power options existed.

However, the site’s permit only applies to a bulk storage tank that holds up to 15,000 gallons of propane — not the many other tanks that appeared in more recent years.

Pillar Ridge resident Jose Tamez counted up to 150 at one point. Tamez recalls hearing a loud bang recently and thought a plane had crashed. Instead, it was a ruptured propane tank.

“We stopped wondering if there would be an explosion, and started wondering when there would be an explosion,” Tamez addressed the council.

AmeriGas representatives said that the tanks were empty. However, some Midcoasters said they fear that they posed dangers and disturbances nevertheless.

Following the Sept. 22 tank rupture, a cloud of white fog rolled in, and a waft of propane scented with ethyl mercaptan drifted northward, driving people from their homes. This also occurred with an Oct. 3 leak that stemmed from the 15,000-gallon storage tank and was due to “operator error.” Ethyl mercaptan is added to propane, which is odorless, to help warn people in the event of a gas leak.

These repeated off-gassing odors have caused some people to become complacent and ignore the warning odor, according to Pillar Ridge on-site property manager Paul Bowman.

“It’s giving a false positive signal,” Bowman said. “Every time we smell mercaptan, (some people) no longer call (for help), which is a huge risk. If they don’t call and we have a legitimate gas leak, we could have an explosion or a fire.”

Ethyl mercaptan poses health risks of its own. Johnson noted that the chemical is thought to cause coma or even death.

It immediately irritated Pillar Ridge residents’ respiratory systems, and can also cause headache, nausea, weakness, fatigue, incoordination, irritation and altered ability to taste, according to the Center for Disease Control.

Acute exposure could also lead to vomiting, diarrhea, central nervous system depression, respiratory paralysis, pulmonary edema, tremors, seizures, liver and kidney damage and hypertension, according to poison control center resources.

“For that chemical to be allowed to off-gas 24/7 and the residents of Pillar Ridge to be breathing that chemical for years — that is a cumulative effect that could be even more harmful to you than the potential explosion of the propane,” Johnson said.

Since removing the smaller storage tanks, AmeriGas officials indicated the bulk storage unit will remain where it stands.

But an environmental consultant's report from 2004 said the 15,000-gallon tank was a potentially life-threatening hazard that could cause "major burns" and "explosive and/or thermal radiation," for residents — even though it met zoning setback requirements from the property line.

"Is it ideal? No, it's probably not ideal in terms of classic zoning," Eadie said. "This is an industrial zone and this is an industrial use ... If there was another place to relocate, AmeriGas would be open to that, but it's just not that easy to find another place that would be cost-effective to do so. They have as much right to be there as the mobile home park does."

Midcoast Community Council Chair Lisa Ketcham said the county is reviewing options to abate the situation.

"We can't rely on AmeriGas to operate the facility safely," she said.