

# Supervisors OK Development Despite Contaminated Well

Los Angeles Times, July 27, 2005 by Jack Leonard

Over environmentalists' objections, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday gave the go-ahead to a 2,500-home development in the fast-growing Santa Clarita Valley despite the recent discovery of underground pollutants in a nearby water well.

Heeding the recommendation of county planning officials, supervisors voted 3 to 1 to approve the West Creek project after the well's owner pledged to clean up ammonium perchlorate found at the site.

Environmentalists have expressed concern that an underground plume of ammonium perchlorate, a component of rocket fuel that has been linked to thyroid problems, will spread to other water wells and could interfere with early childhood development in people who drink the water.

"This pollution could turn out to be as pervasive and detrimental to early childhood development in our communities as leaded paint is," Rachel Myers, conservation program coordinator of the Angeles chapter of the Sierra Club, told supervisors as she urged them to delay approval of the project.

But Robert DiPrimio, president of Valencia Water Co., which owns the contaminated well, reassured supervisors that cleaning would bring contaminants to undetectable levels by October.

"It's a pretty straightforward treatment system," he said.

The project has been tied up in litigation for years. Environmentalists sued Newhall Land and Farming Co. over fears for the safety of local wildlife and concern that the project would drain local water supplies.

The ammonium perchlorate was discovered in April in a well 1.1 miles from the proposed development and near a second one, called Riverpark.

The West Creek project is one of several proposed in the rapidly developing region. The area from roughly Santa Clarita north to the Kern County line has about 600,000 residents, and the Southern California Assn. of Governments expects the population to reach nearly 1 million by 2020.

Studies of laboratory rats have shown that tiny doses of perchlorate can affect the thyroid gland's production of hormones that are critical to early childhood development.

The well showed contamination levels that ranged from 9.8 parts per billion to 10 parts per billion, county officials said. At 6 parts per billion, the state requires well owners to make the results public. At 18 parts per billion, the well must be closed.

Valencia Water Co., which is owned by Newhall Land, immediately shut the well and announced plans to clean it. The discovery prompted county planning officials to commission a supplement to an environmental study for the project that county supervisors had approved in March.

Once the supplement was complete, county planning and public works officials recommended that supervisors approve the project, saying that the well would be cleaned and that the proposed development would have sufficient water even if the well remained closed.

Whether the company shuts down the well or treats it "doesn't make any difference," Dean Efstathiou, assistant director of the Department of Public Works, told the board Tuesday.

Supervisors Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, Mike Antonovich and Gloria Molina voted to approve the project's environmental impact report. A county lawyer said the report would be submitted to the judge overseeing the litigation.

Burke said she was concerned about the water pollution and whether there was enough water for future developments, but she said Newhall Land had met the county's requirements and deserved approval.

"The important thing is every one of those developments, including Newhall Land, is going to have to make sure that the water is actually there at every stage of their development," Burke said.

Zev Yaroslavsky, the board's lone dissenter, said after the vote that he was worried not just about the water contamination but also about traffic congestion and other problems.