

Community receives much needed notice

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For years, Sun Valley -- aka Slum Valley or Smell Valley -- has been one of the most polluted corners of the San Fernando Valley because of lax environmental enforcement, illegal operations and a community with little political clout or activism.

But residents have new, cautious hope for their community, which is home to the Bradley Landfill and more than 30 other trash and recycling facilities, plus dozens of auto dismantlers and parts yards, granite and rock suppliers, and industrial painting and chrome-plating shops.

In the last two years, environmental regulators and politicians have turned their focus to this Northeast Valley neighborhood.

They are working to crack down on the types of problems community activist Jerry Piro has documented in stacks of 8-by-11 photos: overflowing trash bins, slime oozing down a concrete wall, mud and garbage clogging a storm drain.

"My belief is even if it's a heavy industry or a junkyard, it doesn't have to look like a dump," Piro said. "If they're making money in the community they owe it to us."

The cleanup campaign started with an effort by TreePeople, a nonprofit environmental group that wanted to solve the annual flooding problems with a massive new storm water collection plan.

City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo then launched the Sun Valley Initiative, a crackdown on businesses that violated air and water pollution regulations. City Councilman Tony Cardenas came aboard with a plan to designate the community as an Environmental Justice Improvement Area to scrutinize new industrial projects.

And the Chamber of Commerce recently formed Sun Valley Beautiful to organize volunteer efforts to clean up the area.

Every month there have been press conferences, town-hall meetings and sessions for residents to finally voice the frustrations and complaints built up from living in a community that nobody seems to care about.

"We're happy to have a light shone on Sun Valley," said Ellen Mackey, an outspoken member of the East Valley Coalition. "It's been so encouraging for a community that's been dumped on for so long."

Attention hasn't necessarily translated into improvement yet, residents said.

There may be fewer junked cars and trash bins lining the main thoroughfares, but the smell from the 156-acre Bradley Landfill and the recycling facilities can still occasionally overwhelm the senses. A thick haze of dust still hangs in the air and mud coats the roads.

From the earliest days of the San Fernando Valley, Sun Valley was a mining town with deep craters created to collect sand and gravel. As the city developed, people began throwing their trash in the holes, and now a dozen closed landfills lie beneath the area.

During World War II, the booming aerospace industry spread from Burbank and North Hollywood into Sun Valley, bringing with them their chemical processes.

In hindsight, activists say, polluting industries should never have been built so close to homes. As a result, home values remained depressed, and Sun Valley became a haven for low-income residents who didn't have the power -- or didn't know they had the power -- to demand better.

"Because these communities have not had the ability to have a strong voice, especially with their elected leaders, companies have been lulled into a false sense of security that they don't necessarily have to deal with the community," Delgadillo said.

There's no one polluter to blame in Sun Valley but an accumulation of violations, unlicensed operations and rule breakers. Activists say there aren't enough inspections or government oversight for such an industrial neighborhood -- and some inspectors agree.

"A lot of people just don't like government officials out there," said Wendy Phillips, chief of the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board's storm water section. "They do what they need to get out of there and then go back to the way they were doing business before."

Water investigators have found rain runoff in the area is thick with heavy metals, oils and toxic contaminants that frequently exceed acceptable pollution levels. Sun Valley sits on one of the city's largest drinking water aquifers, and what doesn't seep down eventually forms a toxic plume in the Santa Monica Bay.

In late 2002, the City Attorney's Office began team inspections with a task force of air, water and toxics inspectors targeting Bradley Landfill, as well as auto dismantlers, chrome platers and gravel mining operations.

So far, they've conducted 200 inspections and filed misdemeanor charges against 15 companies for violations of environmental laws on storm water reporting and hazardous waste transportation.

"Each case by itself may not seem as serious a matter as, say, the Exxon Valdez. But if you add it up over time and based on the number of potential bad factors, it's a real degradation of the community," Delgadillo said.

Though some businesses privately grumble about the increased scrutiny and government oversight, others said the attention is warranted to catch businesses breaking the rules.

"Most of the businesses feel very confident, especially those in compliance, with the city attorney coming in and doing inspections. It creates a level playing field," said Robert McAllister, who chairs the Chamber of Commerce's government affairs committee.

Meanwhile, Councilman Cardenas is still pushing his Sun Valley Environmental Justice Improvement Area plan, which would add another layer of environmental oversight when new industrial projects are proposed.

In recent months, the chamber has launched Sun Valley Beautiful, a business group to both highlight industry's good deeds and to work with residents on ways to make the neighborhood better.

"We're working with the community and telling our story that we do take our environmental responsibility very seriously," said Todd Spittler, spokesman for Vulcan Materials, which is a member of Sun Valley Beautiful.

But in a community that's been dirty for decades, there is some skepticism that the politicians and businesses will follow through.

"If they enforced the laws here like they do in other areas, there would be a big difference in Sun Valley," Piro said.