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Front Page

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More tests to come for Runkle Canyon

By Darleen Principe darleen@theacorn.com

Simi Valley's proposed Runkle Canyon development will soon undergo further geologic and environmental testing following a recommendation by the California Department of Health Services.

Keith Jajko, a spokesperson for Runkle Canyon, LLC, said the developer will contract with a team of "qualified environmental professionals" to conduct a series of new tests on the 1,500-acre site- a site that's come under fire in recent years by critics who say contaminated runoff from the former Santa Susana Field Laboratory has made the land unfit for homes.

The process will be overseen by the city of Simi Valley, he said.

"The purpose of the testing is to confirm the conclusions in the certified Environmental Impact Report that the property is safe for residential development," Jajko said. "Runkle Canyon, LLC will continue to keep the community informed of any new developments or activities planned at the Runkle Canyon site and will continue to fully cooperate with the city of Simi Valley during its continued development planning."

Last month, consulting firm TetraTech, Inc. of Santa Barbara sent the city an analysis of two surface water samples and one soil sample taken from the site in July. Based on the limited test results, the firm determined that the area posed no immediate threat to the public, despite the presence of arsenic and other heavy metals.

Laura Behjan, assistant city manager, told the *Simi Valley Acorn* last month that the analysis meant there was "no concern for the public's exposure to water or soil on that site."

Still, the city sent the test results to KB Home, the developer proposing to build 461 upscale residences on the property, for review.

Behjan said this week that the city also contacted "other state and federal agencies that have expertise in that area" to look at the studies and give their opinions.

"There had been a concern raised by residents who live in the area outside of Runkle Canyon that there is strontium 90 on the property," she said. "They had questioned whether that had been really reviewed through the environmental impact reports."

Behjan said the California Department of Health Services has been the primary agency responding to the issue and that they recommended Runkle Canyon be tested further in accordance with a specific scientific methodology.

Although the agency only suggested further testing in the northwest corner of the property, the developer will take soil samples from other developable areas at the same time, according to Jajko.

He said they hope to confirm prior laboratory data that showed low background concentrations of strontium 90.

Strontium 90 is a radioactive isotope that has been linked to bone cancer, cancer of the soft tissue near the bone and leukemia. It was first detected slightly above natural levels on the Runkle Ranch property in 1999 by Phoenix-based QST Environmental, who was hired by previous Runkle Canyon developer Greenpark LLC.

Longtime opponent of the project John Southwick told the *Acorn* this week that he was happy to hear more testing would be done in Runkle Canyon.

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"They are actually following up on what we started, which is very good," said Southwick, a Simi Valley resident who is part of an outspoken citizens group that dubbed itself "The Radiation Rangers."

The group, which includes fellow Simi residents Frank Serafine, Patty Coryell and Terry Matheney, independently collected samples from an area in Runkle Canyon in May and paid \$3,000 to have them analyzed by PatChem Laboratories in Moorpark.

Their assertion that the results revealed elevated levels of poisonous arsenic, nickel and copper prompted city officials to conduct their own testing in July. At that time, Southwick accompanied city officials to the site to ensure the samples were taken from the same places.

The completed report from TetraTech Inc. states the surface water samples collected from the Runkle Canyon stream contained metals at "concentrations exceeding selected water criteria." But according to Behjan, there is still no concern about that water because it is not intended for drinking water.

M. Ali Tabidian, a hydrogeology professor at Cal State Northridge who's viewed the TetraTech report, said the concentration of arsenic is on the "high side" in the samples. The more important thing to look at

is where the arsenic is actually coming from, he said.

"At this point we have to do more scientific research to pinpoint the primary source of arsenic," Tabidian said. "Is it from industrial activities or is it naturally occurring? Overall I would comment that you really have to develop some long-range monitoring system. I don't think there's a good monitoring system in place around the perimeter of the field."

Tabidian said he was concerned about where the water would end up.

"I don't like to see contamination anywhere really," he said. "This water is ultimately going to flow into the Arroyo Simi. Arsenic at that concentration could have an impact on the wildlife. There are a number of things that could happen."

Southwick would still like to see the city file a new Environmental Impact Report.

"What we think is that before any construction is done, there needs to be a new EIR because most of the information in the 2004 EIR is not correct," Southwick said. "We found new things up there that they have not addressed."

Southwick said his group is frustrated with what they see as a campaign of misinformation conducted by the city of Simi Valley and KB Home.

"We're trying to get the information correct. The people in Simi Valley deserve to have the correct information, not misinformation and not have things left out," Southwick said.

The assistant city manager said she hopes to get a report back to the City Council within the next month on the latest round of testing.

"There's not much more to say at this point," Behjan said. "We're currently just working through the information and making sure it's all been evaluated by the agencies that need to look at it."