

# MJC teacher on a mission to vindicate state rock

**Adam Ashton, Modesto Bee, 8-2-10**

Recession cutbacks at Modesto Junior College scuttled geology Professor Garry Hayes' summer field courses in places such as the Grand Canyon and Hawaii's volcanoes.

But he's not griping about the Legislature hacking education funding. Instead, he's become a point person for one of Sacramento's sideshows in this season of political and economic crisis.

Hayes is campaigning to retain the status of serpentine -- a glossy, jade-green stone found all over the state -- as California's state rock.

It's under fire because serpentine is a source for asbestos, a cancer-causing construction material. Sen. Gloria Romero, D-Los Angeles, thinks that sends an unhealthy message, particularly for people suffering from lung diseases such as asbestos-caused mesothelioma.

She put forward a bill that would demote serpentine to the level of any old rock in California. She did it by gutting and revising a bill she previously wrote, and the anti-serpentine measure cleared an Assembly committee without generating much attention.

And that's about where you'll ask, "The state budget is more than a month late, why would a lawmaker waste time on a rock?"

Hayes' students at MJC had the same question when they told him about Romero's bill over a thread on Facebook.

"The words that came up the most were 'absurd' and 'ridiculous,' " he said.

Since then, Hayes has been shooting holes in the language of Romero's bill. He picks it apart on a blog he keeps, [www.geotripper.blogspot.com](http://www.geotripper.blogspot.com).

Unlike the bill, Hayes clearly distinguishes between serpentine the rock and asbestos the carcinogen.

"Chrysotile asbestos is sometimes found in serpentine, but serpentine is not asbestos, and as such, should not be branded a known carcinogen in legislation," he writes on Geotripper.

"It's not right of us to condemn the entire rock because part of it could be dangerous," he said last week.

Serpentine has a fun story in California's history. It's common to find native and endemic plants in serpentine soils because they can be hard on outsiders. The metamorphic rock is found in the Sierra Nevada and coastal ranges, and it appears particularly slick when it shows up along earthquake faults. Hayes sees opportunities for research in those earthquake zones.

"The legislation itself makes untrue statements, and from an educational point of view, it shouldn't be passed until it's been vetted by people who are qualified," he said.

It was named the state rock in 1965 at a time when the asbestos business was booming, a key point that its detractors highlight when they advocate its downgrading to common rock status.

"It shouldn't be a symbol for the state, a health-conscious state," said Romero spokeswoman Tela Schaff. "We're not saying there shouldn't be another rock. We're not saying there should be a rock. We're just saying serpentine is not the right rock for California."

Some fear that the language in Romero's bill would effectively declare serpentine the rock a carcinogen. As Hayes hints, "It's minor compared to the state budget, but there are some implications that go far beyond a couple lines of law."

Others are casting doubt on the motives of people such as Hayes who would prefer to keep serpentine as the state's rock, implying that they're shills for the asbestos industry.

"It is amazing how cloudy a simple issue can become when people with different agendas muck up the water," says the Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization, which is lobbying to "drop the rock."

That kind of suspicion is bound to arise when a bill such as this surfaces and people start asking, "Don't they have something better to do?"

Hayes likes to highlight that question, because to most voters, the answer is, "They better."