

High methane gas levels found in soil at Hull Middle School site

Rob Kuznia Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 7-15-10

Methane gas at levels considered "above acceptable" by the state have been found in the soil where construction crews will rebuild the razed Hull Middle School in Torrance.

Officials at the state Department of Toxic Substances Control say that while methane does not pose a health risk for people breathing the air above, the accumulation of methane in buildings can be a potential explosion hazard.

As such, the Torrance Unified School District will install a ventilation system that essentially allows the trapped gas to dissipate into the air.

"A methane hazard is defined as an accumulation - you need to make sure it is redirected and brought up to the surface," DTSC spokeswoman Jeanne Garcia said Wednesday. "We have many schools that have this type of ventilation."

The methane gas is thought to be the vestige of an oil well that was abandoned decades ago. The 5-acre site once marked the presence of six oil wells that pumped crude from 1929 to 1959. All of the wells were abandoned under the oversight of the Division of Oil and Gas by 1969 - the same year the original Hull Middle School was built.

The original school at 2080 W. 231th St. was emptied of students in the fall of 2007 due to a finding that its on-campus trailers were seismically unsound. It was demolished in the summer of 2009.

Hull's roughly 600 students are temporarily attending school about three miles west, at the former site of the shuttered Levy Adult School at 3420 W. 229th Place. The plan is for the students to return to the brand-new Hull Middle School in September 2011.

The methane matter was made public in June, when the district mailed letters to nearby residents instructing them how to submit written comments. Today marks the deadline for submissions.

School officials say the discovery is no surprise. School district spokeswoman Tammy Khan said the district knew about the presence of methane in the soil long before the school was bulldozed a year ago.

"Torrance residents are well aware of the presence of methane gas throughout the community," she said. "However, schools are regulated differently by DTSC than private property owners and, because of this, mitigation of the methane at the Hull site was always part of the construction planning process."

Khan added that the district's plan to address the methane gas isn't expected to increase the cost of the \$18.8 million project, because the initial expense estimates took the mitigation effort into account. The methane discovery also isn't expected to delay the school's reopening.

As is required by law, the Torrance school district in early June mailed a fact sheet and official notification about the methane gas to every household within a quarter-mile radius of the school. The district also placed an informational ad in the Daily Breeze.

Khan said the district hasn't received many comments to date, although she didn't have an exact figure Wednesday.

The ventilation system being built by the district will essentially amount to a series of shallow, gravel-filled trenches containing gas collection pipes, according to the DTSC.

Garcia said such efforts are relatively common at schools in Southern California.

"I think the L.A. area was known for the oil wells in the old days," she said. "We have them peppered throughout the state but it seems to be concentrated in Southern California."

State officials have been testing the general area for contaminants since at least 2002, when two abandoned wells were found to be leaking trace amounts of methane gas. They were fixed the following year.

In 2009, all the wells were tested again under the oversight of the Division of Oil and Gas and Geothermal Resources. Though no wells were found to be leaking, researchers did find methane near two wells that were not previously tested due to their proximity to the old school buildings.

Public comments can be e-mailed to Jeanne Matsumoto, public participation specialist with the DTSC, at jmatsumo@dtsc.ca.gov.