

Church Hazards Claimed, Refuted

Glenn Barr, Lake Arrowhead Mountain-News, 6-24-10

This week we continue a series of articles examining the impacts of a proposed church-expansion project. In this issue we look at hazards and drainage issues.

Water-how it would impact soil stability and how its runoff would affect lower-lying areas-has raised concerns among community activists who have read the environmental impact report (EIR) of the proposed Church of the Woods project in Rimforest.

In a four-page June 17 letter to county planner Matt Slowik, Rimforest resident and project opponent Carol Pedder outlines hazards she contends the 38-acre project along Highway 18 will pose, as well as water and drainage problems she predicts it will create.

A copy of that letter, drafted following her study of sections of the EIR, was made available to this newspaper.

Lake Arrowhead-based Church of the Woods seeks to build a new church on land between Daley Canyon Road and Bear Springs Road. The three-phased project would include a worship center seating 1,200, several structures and sports fields.

As described in its EIR, Pedder believes, the project would produce numerous threats to both the site itself and to Daley Canyon, including the communities of Agua Fria and Blue Jay. It could also lead to pollution of the water in Lake Arrowhead, she asserts.

HIGH-WATER AREA

Pedder states the entire church property is a high-water area and predicts severe liquefaction could occur during a heavy rain or an earthquake. She said water comes up from underground on the site, which she terms "a natural recharge area for the aquifer under it."

Pedder claims there is "great potential for liquefaction at cut/fill sites that are subject to slip and slide hazards." Liquefaction could occur under buildings on the property in a heavy or 100-year rain, she predicts.

In heavy rains there would be "a mud and water flow of horrendous proportions down the canyon to Agua Fria, the county yard and Blue Jay, wiping out anything or anyone in its path."

Patrick Hopkins, Church of the Woods' project manager, was contacted for response to points raised in Pedder's letter.

"If they'd read the soils report they'd know it's not the type of soil subject to liquefaction," Hopkins said. "The entire mountain is decomposed granite." It is the interface of different types of soils, including sandy earth, that prompts liquefaction, he said.

"This project is not susceptible to liquefaction," he said. "There will be no export or import of dirt. The same dirt is used for cut and fill, in compliance with county requirements."

SEWER LINE BREAK

Pedder's letter says the area's existing sewer line crosses Little Bear Creek at at least one point. In a flood that

might originate on the church property this line could break and raw sewage could flood the canyon and reach the lake, she claims.

Hopkins counters that allegation, saying the project wouldn't cause runoff that could trigger such a problem, noting that the EIR's hydrology section states runoff from the development would be similar to existing storm runoff.

"As you flatten out the topography of the land you lessen the intensity of the water flow," he said. "Grading will reduce the steepness (of the land) and slow the water down."

Drainage techniques proposed for the project, Pedder says, would fill with rubble and jam up with debris.

"Even normal rains carry rocks, branches and debris down Bear Springs Road, so the runoff from the site would be far worse," she predicts.

Hopkins claimed the opposite will be the case, saying debris flow would actually be slowed by the project. "We're going to be lessening the debris flow into the creek from what it is now," he said.

Pedder also claims it would be unsafe to build in an area prone to moderate to high landslide probability, a description she claims applies to the church land.

"She's wrong," Hopkins said. "There is one area that stretches across Highway 18 that is susceptible to some slide movement," he said. "We were told that if it's only used as a parking lot we're fine." Thus the church plans to set its buildings back from that area and install parking atop it, he said.

STATE SUPPORT

Hopkins' comments were supported in a general way by Don Drysdale, a spokesman for the state Department of Conservation, whose California Geological Survey division maps areas subject to landslides and liquefaction.

Drysdale said Tuesday his department has yet to map the San Bernardino Mountains for slide probability though, using federal funds, it mapped most of the higher-populated Los Angeles and Orange Counties in the 1990s.

Drysdale differentiated between liquefaction, which he said requires both sandy soil and heavy ground shaking caused by an earthquake, and mudslides, which result from saturation of the ground.

Pedder's position, however, is supported by the geologic hazard overlay map contained in the San Bernardino County General Plan, which appears to show the entire mountainside from the church property to the valley floor as lying in an area of moderate to high landslide susceptibility.

In her assessment of drainage and water issues, Pedder notes that the EIR says both the state and federal governments have jurisdiction over portions of the site's drainage. Accordingly, she says, both governments' comments should be solicited before any work is done. The EIR appears not to list either in its roster of agencies notified of the project.

The way the process works, Hopkins countered, is that once the project gets county approval the church will submit to state and federal authorities applications for needed permits. He said Pedder's call for notifying those agencies at this time is "premature," and said the church has "taken great care on each of these issues."

DRAINAGE RETENTION

Pedder next cites a county General Plan provision calling for the retention of the natural drainage bottom for storm water drainage facilities and flood-control channels required for developments.

"How can you retain the natural drainage bottom if you cram the drainage channel into a 60-inch pipe that is buried under tons of earth, asphalt and concrete," she queries.

In response, Hopkins said there is really no existing storm drain facility on the property.

"We get runoff from Highway 18 and Bear Springs Road," he said. "It just meanders across the property until it reaches the creek. Our plan is to take that water and put it into a pipe. We're not covering the stream at all, not one square inch. We're only undergrounding the current runoff." The pipe will follow the same route as the current natural drainage, he said.

When the Crestline-Lake Arrowhead Water Agency (CLAWA) installs a water line to serve the project it will need to be buried on a steep hillside, Pedder notes.

"Wherever the water line is installed it will cause environmental problems," she says. "That means Little Bear Creek and the wetlands surrounding it will be decimated," something she calls "an environmental disaster CEQA (the California Environmental Quality Act) and NEPA (the National Environmental Policy Act) guidelines would not permit."

NO DESIGN YET

Hopkins said he doesn't know how such a comment can be made at this point, since CLAWA hasn't even designed the water line that would serve the project. "She's way ahead of where we are in our design," he said.

Pedder's final point notes that CLAWA water has a high level of chlorine. When chlorine contacts organic materials in water it forms trihalomethane, "a suspected carcinogen," she says. She predicts runoff from the church grounds will be full of that substance.

Pedder's letter also says fertilizer placed on the church's ball fields and other landscaping will contain phosphates, nitrates and ammonia. When these chemicals reach Lake Arrowhead, she says, they will pollute the community's main source of drinking water and cause algae to grow in it.

Hopkins declined to comment on that assertion, saying he has "no idea about CLAWA's chlorine level." However, Ken Nelsen, water operations manager for the Lake Arrowhead Community Services District, said he's not overly concerned about the points Pedder raises.

If applied within manufacturer's standards, Nelsen said, fertilizer placed on the church's landscaping "shouldn't be a problem. Nitrates break down in soils and new grass uses them to grow." The same happens with phosphates, he said, and ammonia converts to nitrates and is consumed by plants.

Nelsen agreed that phosphates and nitrates can cause algae, but said their concentration would have to be at least one part per million (ppm) to be detected; the allowable standard for drinking water is 10 ppm, he said.

Nelsen also said the point where Little Bear Creek enters Lake Arrowhead is at least a half mile from the two spots where his district draws drinking water, meaning harmful substances would have their concentrations reduced before reaching them.