

Pacifica orders evacuation of apartments on crumbling cliff

Joshua Melvin, San Mateo County Times, 5-1-10

Pacifica officials have ordered the remaining tenants of an apartment building that sits on the edge of a crumbling cliff to evacuate because of safety concerns.

Dana Howe, 54, stood in the now-empty living room of his apartment at 320 Esplanade Ave. on Friday and said most of his neighbors had already left. He had made the decision to move out of the 20-unit building on Wednesday.

"We knew it was coming," he said. "How can you condemn half of a building?"

Pacifica building officials made that departure mandatory Thursday when they told the roughly four remaining residents that they would have to be out by 11 p.m. Sunday.

Pacifica building official Doug Rider said that based on engineering analyses reviewed this week, residents' safety could not be guaranteed in the event of a major earthquake.

Six units at that apartment house were already red-tagged in January when a massive hunk of the cliff tumbled into the Pacific Ocean. Residents who lived next door at 330 Esplanade Ave. were also ordered out of their homes in December when officials decided too much of the bluff was gone for that building to be safe.

It was a quiet departure Friday morning and hardly resembled the frantic exodus in December when residents were told at one point they had an hour to get out.

One woman, who neighbors said moved in three weeks ago, but who declined to speak to reporters, calmly carried her possessions out with the help of a friend.

Tyree Johnson, a 15-year resident, was organizing his move to a new apartment in San Francisco. He said he was never really worried that the cliff would give way but had finally decided to move out when friends from Temple United Methodist church in San Francisco convinced him there was a danger.

"I'd come back here in a second," he said. "Until I got (the condemnation notice), I was leaving with a bit of regret."

Moving back is a distant and unlikely possibility at this point. The project to build a retaining wall behind 320 and 330 Esplanade is on hold. Disagreements over a long-term strategy to deal with the bluff erosion and difficulty coming up with the millions of dollars to pay for the work mean any kind of a fix could be far off.

However, Michael Jones, who is an associate of 320 Esplanade owner Millard Tong, was more hopeful. He said work behind Tong's building will start again soon, but he wasn't sure when that would be.

"Everybody has to agree," he added. " We have to get permits, and that is going to take time."

There also is the possibility of a legal action hanging in the air. A source with extensive knowledge of the situation but who requested anonymity said one or more of the owners may file a lawsuit against Pacifica for its handling of the situation. The lawsuit would allege that the city didn't take proper remediation steps against

erosion and had given the original approval to build the structure on a sandy bluff, the source said. It could be filed in the coming weeks.

The conflict and uncertainty that have grown out of the cliff's crumbling have taken a toll on all involved, especially residents. Some moved from 330 to 320 Esplanade after the former building was red-tagged, only to be forced out again. Others just gave up and left. For those who stuck around, there was the difficulty of living in a construction site and dealing with a street clogged by people who drove by to see the neighborhood for themselves.

"It's just been magical," said Johnson, referring to the view out of his living room window. "I was hoping this wasn't going to happen."