

Oozing hillside threatens 8 homes in Hercules

Carolyn Jones, San Francisco Chronicle, 3-30-11

A waterlogged, collapsing hillside in Hercules has slopped onto four homes and is threatening four more, prompting authorities to evacuate all eight.

Four were red-tagged last week, which prohibits residents from entering, and the city limited residents' access to four more on Tuesday as the hillside, soaked after weeks of heavy rainfall, continued to slip.

"The landslide has wrecked these people's lives," said Joseph Loo, who lives across from the eight threatened homes on Carson Street. "These people are losing their homes, their biggest investment, and now they have nowhere to go."

The hillside above Carson Street has been shifting on and off for at least a decade, city officials said, but the recent downpours have hastened the slide into backyards and under foundations of the upscale neighborhood in western Contra Costa County.

Last week, mud oozed so close to four of the homes that the city ringed them with barricades and yellow safety tape. Inside the homes, workers could see cracked walls, broken windows and tilting floors where the mud pressed against the structure of the house.

All four of those homes were already vacant, in part because of landslides. An additional house, at 215 Carson St., was razed several years ago when the advancing earth ruptured the foundation.

The City Council was on the verge of declaring the area a disaster zone, to obtain state funding to repair infrastructure damage and help homeowners.

The Refugio Heights Homeowners Association owns the hillside and should be responsible for whatever havoc the hill creates, said Hercules associate city engineer Erwin Blancaflor.

"We've tried everything we could, but it's private property," he said. "Right now, we're just monitoring the movement of the dirt."

A call to the homeowners association was not returned Tuesday. Neighbors said that residents have been in lengthy disputes over liability with the homeowners association, city and the developer who built the neighborhood in 1987.

Landslides have plagued two other East Bay cities in the past week.

In San Pablo, three homes were evacuated after a slide between Wyman and Hillcrest streets. The city has been removing trees, working with county and state officials and geotechnical experts, and setting up a donation fund to help displaced homeowners.

In Pleasanton, a landslide on Pleasanton Ridge destroyed a water main Friday, disrupting water supplies to 160 homes. No homes were damaged.

Hillsides are more vulnerable to landslides in the spring because the water inside the soaked earth begins to expand when the air temperature rises, forcing large chunks of a hill to move, Blancaflor said.

In Hercules, the landslide is about 300 feet wide and 150 feet deep, pushing 818 tons of mud onto the homes below.

"I've looked out my window and watched it move," said Stephen Richardson, who lives across from the affected homes on Carson Street. "Everyone keeps looking for someone to sue, but the hill just keeps coming."