

San Pablo landslide victims ponder options

Tom Lochner, Bay Area News Group, 3-29-11

As the Bay Area's rainy weather gave way to sunshine Monday, San Pablo officials and some homeowners routed by a recent landslide pondered who is going to pay for the damage to their homes and for an engineering solution to prevent reoccurrences.

Six residential properties on Wyman Street and Hillcrest Road were damaged by a landslide after heavy rain on Thursday and two empty lots on Hillcrest also were impacted. San Pablo officials proclaimed a local emergency on Sunday and asked that Contra Costa County and the state do likewise, in the hope of freeing state and federal funds to help fix the damage.

"I don't know which is worse -- walking through the mud or walking through the spreadsheets," Assistant City Manager Kelsey Worthy quipped. He has been man-on-the-spot for San Pablo since the crisis began Thursday.

On Saturday, the city yellow-tagged three of the homes, meaning they are unsafe for human occupancy and can be accessed only under restrictions and during daylight to retrieve personal effects. The city also red-tagged a patio deck, putting it off-limits.

The city put up Leon and Blanka Walker and their two children at a nearby hotel; two other families with yellow-tagged homes have moved in with friends or family, officials said. A fourth family moved out of their Wyman Street home.

Worthy said Monday it is too early to estimate what it would cost to fix the problem or to predict any specific engineering solution.

Earth movements are frequent in the general area, which contains slices of three jurisdictions -- Contra Costa County and the cities of San Pablo and Richmond -- and is traversed by the Hayward Fault.

Residents have reported water gushing out of numerous spots in the ground and the hills in recent days.

"Everything's totally saturated," said San Pablo Public Works Director Adele Ho. "There are a lot of springs in those hills."

Charles Hardy, spokesman for the East Bay Municipal Utility District, said there are no current issues with his agency's pipes and other infrastructure in the area.

Added Ho, "We are not aware at this point of any broken utility lines."

The Walkers, who have lived on Wyman Street for seven years, said they do not know how they will address the financial challenges that lie ahead. Blanka Walker called her insurer, Allstate, on Friday. She said a claims adjuster told her she was out of luck because she doesn't have flood insurance.

"You're supposed to be in good hands with Allstate," Leon Walker said, "but I haven't seen their hands. They've been hands-off."

Dave Buscheck, a Walnut Creek engineer who read about the Walkers' plight, said he was appalled by the insurance company's reaction.

"Landslides are not caused by flooding in the traditional sense," Buscheck said. "Excessive water obviously is one contributing factor but there are many factors in play. He cited "over-steepened slope angle, development, soil type, drainage, vegetative cover, presence of older slide planes," among other factors.

"Besides," Buscheck added, "who lives on hillsides and carries flood insurance?"

The adjuster who handled Blanka Walker's inquiry referred Bay Area News Group to Bill Millander of the company's corporate relations department. Millander said Monday afternoon "I've spoken to our claims folks," adding that Allstate "is doing everything we can to investigate the claim. We will do everything we can to help this customer out. Absolutely 100 percent."