

# Neighborhood torn apart by landslide

Melody Karpinski, Santa Rosa Press Democrat, 4-26-13

LAKEPORT — The open door at the end of the hallway should lead to the bedroom in Jag Singh's house.

But inside, the floor has disappeared, replaced by a gaping hole that opens to rubble and dirt nearly 10 feet below.

“We're lucky we moved out in time,” said Singh, who bought his house on Lancaster Road in 2011. “It started (cracking) a little at a time, but as soon as we moved out it all came down.”

The ground is moving underneath the homes in this section of Lakeside Heights, a hillside neighborhood of two-dozen houses, duplexes and four-plexes north of Lakeport. The slide, which began in late March, has damaged five homes so badly they are too dangerous to live in. Two cannot be repaired and must be torn down.

Now, residents and county officials are searching for answers — and arguing over who is to blame.

The Lake County Board of Supervisors unanimously declared the site a local emergency April 16. Damage caused by the landslide is forcing the county to relocate water and sewer lines, costing up to \$500,000, Supervisor Anthony Farrington said.

Singh, who lived in a corner unit with his wife, daughter and parents, relocated to a rental in nearby Nice. The backside of Singh's house — what used to be two bedrooms and a deck — has completely collapsed.

Singh's house didn't sustain the worst of the damage. The county ordered one house to be demolished and is in the process of seeking similar action on a second home, which is sinking 10 feet below what used to be the driveway.

The cause of the slide has not yet been determined, but residents and the county are already pointing fingers.

A report released by Lake County Special Districts April 4 cited a leak in a homeowner's association irrigation line as a possible cause for water saturation along the hillside. The line was shut off to prevent further damage.

“My gut is telling me that you have different issues and driving factors here,” said Farrington. “You've got underground water, an irrigation system possibly acting as a conduit, poorly compacted soil and some design defects in the foundations of these homes.”

Garey Hurn, treasurer of the Lakeside Heights Homeowner's Association, doesn't believe the group's water line is the source of the slide.

“Yes, we have had leaks in the past, which is why we turned it off ourselves in November,” said Hurn. “But according to one of our members, seepage issues have been going on for 20-plus years.”

One woman who used to occupy a home that completely collapsed had called geologists several years ago after noticing soil instability, Hurn said. The home was sold for \$20,000 in foreclosure last year.

Expectant mother Michaela Schnabl, who has lived across the street from the affected homes since 2010, isn't waiting to see if the cracks on her home are as serious.

Schnabl, who is a nurse at Sutter Lakeside Hospital across the street, and her husband have already decided to

move and are looking for a place to live. She said the fire department stopped by Tuesday to prepare an evacuation plan for residents if the landslide continues.

“We made our own evacuation plan,” said Schnabl.

Most of the homeowners have been forced to absorb relocation and damage costs, with one family citing expenses of more than \$8,000, Farrington said.

Singh said his insurance company sent someone out to take pictures of his home. The insurance company told Singh nothing could be done until the source of the problem was determined, and his attempts to reach someone for more information have been unanswered.

Schnabl's insurance company was still reviewing her policy, but initially stated landslides weren't covered.

“The sad thing is people like (Singh) and all of these homeowners are very angry and scared and they have a right to be,” said Farrington. “They want to figure out who to blame. It's easy to blame the county because we permitted the structures, but I don't know where the liability falls with us, which is why we're trying to determine the cause.”

The Board of Supervisors is seeking state and federal assistance for the affected homeowners and funds to relocate water and sewer lines, Farrington said. A state geologist began assessing the area Tuesday at the request of the California Emergency Management Agency.

Both Farrington and Hurn said the original development group that built the homes had a history of substandard work. Yet Hurn also questioned how county building inspectors could have missed the foundational problems later on.

“Were these improper building inspections by county officials?” said Hurn.

For homeowners, getting answers could still be a ways off. The county spent \$55,000 to bring in Santa Rosa geotechnical firm RGH Consultants to investigate.

“At this time we have not determined the cause of the landslide,” said Jared Pratt, a geologist and RGH's vice president. “There likely are several conditions that contribute or act as driving forces and as they added up, they finally overtook the resisting forces and began movement.”

Singh moved the last of his belongings out of the house Wednesday. “I thought we might be able to save it,” he said. “I was kind of hopeful.”