

No, the gas leak hasn't turned Porter Ranch into a ghost town

Alice Walton, Los Angeles Times, 1-30-16

Roberta Cohen seems like the first person who should have left her Porter Ranch neighborhood to avoid the natural gas leak.

At age 88, this great-grandmother and widow could be considered at-risk. She has breathing problems, emphysema and enough health concerns to fill a page, she says.

"I'm living on half a lung so if anyone should leave — *hello*," Cohen said in her deep, gravelly voice while pointing to herself.

But as her neighbors flee their gated community, Cohen isn't going anywhere.

"Because I'm fine," she said in her living room on a recent morning as she waited for crews to install new weatherstripping on her doors. "There's no reason why people cannot tolerate it. It's nothing."

She's referring to the noxious odors coming from SS-25, a leaking natural gas well that's about a mile from the nearest home in Porter Ranch. People have reported suffering from nausea, headaches and nosebleeds. Even their pets are getting sick.

The fumes have led to the temporary relocation of 3,083 households, according to the latest count from Southern California Gas Co. The departures have left some neighborhoods empty and local businesses hurting for customers.

But the community of 30,000 is hardly the ghost town some have portrayed it to be.

Despite the gas leak, life looks relatively normal. Customers still fight for parking spaces outside the Starbucks at Porter Ranch Town Center. Children are playing in parks, and cyclists zoom along Sesnon Boulevard.

Mail carriers continue to deliver letters and packages, and so far none have fallen ill, said a spokesman for the United States Postal Service.

At the branch library, mothers shush noisy toddlers and older residents sit at tables and in armchairs to read books.

The gas leak's effect, however, can be seen on days when the library offers story time. The typical audience of 40 to 45 people has dwindled to just 10 or 15, a library spokesman said.

At Shepherd of the Hills Church, which has been used by attorneys, politicians and state regulators for hearings on the gas leak, an estimated 9,000 members still worship at the five weekend services.

"We have not seen abnormal changes in attendance or giving," said Executive Pastor Tim Winters, though some church employees started working from home to avoid falling ill.

Some congregants are scared or frustrated by a lack of specifics from the gas company about when the well will be fixed and long-term health effects, Winters said.

"You hate to see the community so divided in how they react to it — whether they should leave, whether they should stay," Winters said.

Marianne Love is among the community's residents who remained in her home.

"If this happened at any other time of the year, (relocation) would have definitely been an option," Love said. "But since it was winter and it is so cold and rainy, we don't go outside that much."

The utility provided Love with air filters and weatherstripping around her front doors.

"We feel pretty good about having that," she said, noting she no longer opens her windows or takes long walks in her hilly neighborhood.

Residents who remain in their homes may still have claims against the utility so some are hiring lawyers.

Attorney Brian Panish, who is part of the team that filed a class-action lawsuit against SoCal Gas, said that while most of his clients have relocated, some have chosen to stay either because they don't want to leave or can't find adequate accommodations. The gas company said 2,817 people are on a waiting list to move.

The primary concern of residents remaining in Porter Ranch is property value, Panish said.

"Who's going to want to buy their home now that all these problems are happening?" he said. "There's no question that the value of the properties has decreased. The question is how much."

At a meeting in West Hills earlier this month, attorney Robin Greenwald told a room full of potential clients that whether they move or stay, the gas leak is interrupting their daily lives and creating unnecessary stress.

For people who remain in their homes, "they are in a situation where they're losing their neighbors too because some of their neighbors have relocated. So they lose that sense of community.

"And they live in fear each day that they're not making the right decision and are they causing long-term impact to themselves and their families," Greenwald said.

For families who want to leave, the gas company is providing up to \$7,500 a month for temporary housing, \$500 for utilities and \$45 a day per person for food. The utility is also picking up the tab for moving expenses and pet care.

The utility pays the relocation funds directly to landlords or hotels if customers arrange their move through the utility.

That feels unfair to some who remain in their homes. Air filters are the only compensation they're receiving. Arlene Cantor waited on her filters for a month.

"Don't overlook us," Cantor said. "We're not getting the \$8,000, \$9,000 a month. We're not getting help with our mortgage. It seems to me that you'd want to take care of the people who are still here in some way."

To date, gas crews have installed 2,706 air purification systems and 820 plug-in systems. They've also weatherized 2,245 homes, a gas company spokeswoman said.

Those who stay in Porter Ranch are supporting the community and local businesses, Cantor said, even though there's not much upside for them.

"Our equity has gone down in our houses," he said. "We're suffering, too. Maybe not in a physical way that way but we're still suffering."

Back in her living room, Cohen also believes financial compensation should be paid to residents who remain in their homes.

She's also convinced that some of her "relocated" neighbors have not really moved out of their homes so she's counting the cars in their driveways and taking pictures of the garbage cans they put out on trash day.

"When you go on vacation, do you go back every three days to get something?" she asked. "Then why are these people entitled to come back? And they're getting money."

The gas company said it is making lodging payments directly to landlords, although some residents who find their own temporary housing can apply for reimbursement.

In Cohen's opinion, if a resident who moved is well enough to come back to their house, they're well enough to stay. And if the gas' odorants give them a headache, Cohen has some advice: "Take an aspirin."