

East Bay community face uncertainty amid landslide concern

Rick Hurd and Matthias Gafni, San Jose Mercury News, 3-14-16

MORAGA -- Residents in a neighborhood hit by storms spent the night elsewhere amid uncertain futures as another day of steady rain further eroded the ground underneath at least one home near the Moraga Country Club on Sunday.

Two residents who said they haven't spent a night in their homes since Thursday were gone, and a third residence appeared vacated in the 900 block of Augusta Drive, where curious onlookers marched through occasional streams of rain to get a look at the homes. At least one residence appeared to be hanging perilously above a slope that appeared too saturated to hold it.

"There has been further erosion," said spokeswoman Andrea Pook of the East Bay Municipal Utility District, which owns the land below the slide. "We're doing everything we can to address the issues, but we can do only so much against Mother Nature."

Another El Nino-fueled storm moved through the area for most of Sunday. The National Weather Service recorded .92 inches of rain in nearby Orinda over a 12-hour period ending at 7 p.m., bad news for residents who already noticed significant movement before Sunday's storm even hit.

"The land has moved substantially lower," Tim Alford said Sunday morning. Alford's home has been affected the most. "I don't know that I should call it a landslide, because that gives the image that everything is sliding down the hill. But the ground is eroding. It's pretty dramatic."

Below the homes, EBMUD crews worked to find solutions for new "cracks" on the Lafayette-Moraga Trail. The land was so saturated that the trail became hazardous, and police issued an alert Sunday afternoon for residents to stay off the trail between Canyon Road and Moraga Way.

The agency hired a geotechnical engineer to determine the steps needed to protect the area now and in the future. An engineer from the Town of Moraga assessed the safety of the homes.

"We can take action, and we may need to do A, B, C, or D, hypothetically," Pook said. "When do we do A? When do we do B, and where do we start?"

The rain seemed to lighten by 8 p.m. Sunday, and Pook said an expected week of sun would be helpful to the agency's efforts.

Alford's five-bedroom, multistory home still was standing Sunday morning, but he said the foundation and floors had buckled. The backyard porches have collapsed, and the windows in the home are warped, he said.

He said his family has left the home, and that they don't know when they'll be able to live in it again. They have not spent a night in the home since Thursday, he said.

"I've been told by a soil geologist that the house is not safe," he said.

Alford and his neighbors raised concerns Saturday that EBMUD knew about the danger weeks ago but did not take immediate action.

Pook said Saturday that an evaluation by an expert in January regarding land movement below the paved Lafayette-Moraga Trail that runs behind the houses did not indicate any immediate signs of danger.

EBMUD contacted residents, the Moraga County Club and the East Bay Regional Park District when more land movement happened earlier this week.

On Sunday afternoon, nearby homeowner Dennis Martel was watching the rain and making preparations.

"We're preparing to move but, obviously, you can't get movers with it pouring down rain," Martel said. "We're taking some stuff to more supported areas of the house. The situation is changing below our house, EBMUD crews are working, and the property is changing by the hour.

"With more rain, it becomes more exacerbated, because the hillside below us is failing and it jeopardizes the structural integrity of the house," Martel said.

Martel, who said neighbors have continued to come by and help bag items and move them to cars, said he was moving what was essential and hoping for the best.

"The nonessential things, they go with the house. If you're walking and you're talking, you're good."

The National Weather Service said Moraga recorded 1.96 inches of rain in the 24 hours leading up to 11 a.m. Sunday, and said the rain would continue on and off, heavily at times, until late Sunday early Monday.

Check back for updates.