

Manhattan Beach to urge California to drop serpentine as state rock

Andrea Woodhouse, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 10-20-09

The latest environmental hazard to find itself in Manhattan Beach's cross hairs is serpentine, an asbestos host designated as the state rock.

City leaders there are set tonight to join a nascent movement urging the state Legislature to drop the rock, while also raising public awareness about the dangers of asbestos, Mayor Portia Cohen said.

"It's to garner more awareness and attention and effort toward eradicating asbestos use in the United States and abroad," she said. "Passing a resolution asking our state to drop serpentine as a state rock is symbolic of bringing more attention that asbestos continues to kill many people."

The city could become the first municipality to get on board with "Swap the Rock," a campaign launched by the Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization, whose co-founder is a Manhattan Beach resident.

Executive Director Linda Reinstein said the organization plans to take the campaign to other cities.

"We have a strategic plan in place and look forward to working with other victims and political leaders in the state of California," she said.

In selecting serpentine as the state rock in 1965, California became the first state in the union to select a favorite stone, according to the California State Library.

The rock can range from apple-green to black in color, or appear marbled, according to the California Geological Survey. Commonly found in central and Northern California and along fault lines, serpentine has a shiny or wax-like appearance, the survey reported.

"It's a green rock," Reinstein said. "It could be kind of pretty if you didn't know the difference."

Comparing serpentine to a chunk of blue cheese dotted with veins of mold, Reinstein said serpentine contains lines of chrysotile asbestos that, when cut into, can release the poison.

In fact, the state Air Resources Board in 1990 restricted its use as an unpaved road surface.

But its asbestos properties apparently prompted serpentine's state honor in the first place, Reinstein added. Lobbyists pushed for the designation because they argued asbestos harvesting would become a primary industry for the region, she said.

Reinstein didn't think California dumping serpentine would cause too much trouble - after all, more than half of U.S. states are without official rocks.

"Some states have a mineral, a rock and a gemstone. I think California has all three," she said. "Some don't have any. It's not like we have to change the Minerva seal or anything."

Though Manhattan Beach has of late considered bans of other environmental hazards, like plastic bags and

polystyrene products, signing on with the campaign would be purely symbolic, Cohen said.

"I think some people are annoyed that we reach beyond our local envelope," Cohen said. "We take care of business at home first, and we're ambitious and have the ability to look beyond our borders."