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A Carson neighborhood's future is on hold

By Gene Maddaus Staff Writer
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Chris Gutierrez, 43, stands in front of his home of 33 years on Marbella Ave. in Carson. The home is in the Carousel tract that was built on the site of oil tank farm. (Robert Casillas Staff Photographer)

About a year ago, Elizabeth Noriega's son started having migraines. She took him to the doctor, who referred him to a neurologist. His blood was drawn, but the results were inconclusive.

Then, in August, she discovered that her home was built on top of an oil tank farm. She also learned that the soil underneath the Carousel tract in Carson is contaminated with high levels of methane and benzene. She wondered: Could there be a connection?

"I have no clue if this is related to that," she said. "The doctor asked me to move him out for a month to see what it does to his migraines."

Throughout the neighborhood, families are having similar conversations.

Chris Gutierrez's daughter is 20, and was just diagnosed with asthma.

Rudy Naval, 61, had a rare form of lung cancer a few years ago, though he never smoked.

"Was it triggered because of the environment we were living in?" he asked. "We don't know."

Since the contamination was discovered almost four months ago, most of the 275 homeowners in the Carousel tract have signed on to a lawsuit against Shell Oil. The Carousel development is north of Lomita Boulevard, between Marbella and Panama avenues.

Shell operated the tank farm until 1967, when it was demolished and the neighborhood of single-family homes was developed.

But the litigation could take years to resolve. In the meantime, the residents of the tract are in a state of limbo - unsure if

they should move, or whether anyone would buy their homes if they decided to sell.

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"We're stuck here," said Lourdes Piazza, 47. "As homeowners, there's nothing we can do. Here I walk every night, eat healthy, and I've been living in this mess for 20 years."

Shell Oil is responsible for testing and remediating the Carousel tract under the supervision of the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board. But when the lawyers got involved, the testing came to a halt.

The attorneys warned their clients not to sign access agreements, because they could contain language that protected Shell Oil.

"It's worrisome to us that we know we need to get this information and we can't obtain it," said Mary Ann Lutz of the water board. "That's not been the norm for us. Because there are lawyers involved, it

precludes us from doing our job."

So far, only 35 of the 275 households have allowed soil testing on their property, said Alison Chassin, a Shell spokeswoman. Of those 35, only five homes had contaminant levels high enough to merit further testing, she said.

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"Our largest concern right now is that we don't have access to continue testing on the residential properties," she said.

The Naval family was one of the 35 that allowed the testing. They said they were disturbed to see the workers pull up thick, goeey clumps of oil from their backyard.

"At times I feel guilty, to have exposed this type of environment to my children," Naval said.

His wife, Rosemary, frequently digs in the backyard to tend her garden.

"He was emotionally distraught," she said. "He felt, 'What did I do? Why did I expose my wife to that?'"

Many residents mistrust the water board, which they feel is too closely aligned with Shell. At a pair of meetings in September, many said they were not given direct answers to their questions.

Now, many are closely following the release of documents on the water board's Web site. Some were alarmed to see a proposal to install ventilation machines in their garages.

"With a machine attachment, I've lost all the value of my home," Gutierrez said. "I wouldn't want to live with a machine attached to my house. After reading that report last week, I don't really want to stay here anymore."

Others are growing impatient.

"I just want out of here as soon as possible, and they're trying to drag their feet," Piazza said. "They've ruined our lives forever. That's how I feel. Get me out. Give me money so I can go somewhere else and buy another house."

That may be an option, but Shell and the water board both say it is far too soon to tell.

Meanwhile, it is not clear what effect the contamination has had on home values. Home prices are down anyway, and real estate agents say some buyers seem more concerned than others about the situation in the Carousel tract.

"A couple people already live in the area, and they don't seem to care too much," said Marivel Costanza, a Realtor who is trying to sell a home in the Carousel tract. "Some ask me questions. I say please make sure you do all your research, and they don't come back. All I can do is give full disclosure and let people make up their minds."

Dee Dee Cavanagh, another Realtor with a listing in the Carousel neighborhood, said she lost a sale that was in escrow because of the contamination. She said she had heard that other agents had been harassed by neighbors who believe no one should be selling homes in the area.

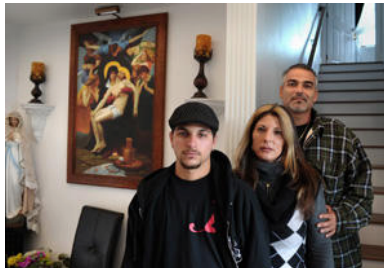
"I don't know how we're supposed to proceed in this market," Cavanagh said. "You can't tell them what the future will hold. Nobody can give any good answers."

Another agent said she had lost two sales in escrow due to the contamination. Since the disclosure, one house has sold on Neptune Avenue. But the agent, Vicky Matute, said the contamination did not come up during the inspection.

There are almost no "For Sale" signs up in the neighborhood, because agents have learned that they draw too much negative attention. Driving around the neighborhood, there is only one sign that gives any hint of the problems there.

A homeowner planted it on his front yard: "Long live the Carousel."

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Martin, 20, Elizabeth and Ruben Noriega family living in the Carousel home tract in Carson that was once the site of a Shell Oil tank farm. (Brad Graverson Staff Photographer)

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