

Summit slide theory disputed

Homeowners discount quake hazard

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SUMMIT — Earthquake-induced cracking in the Santa Cruz Mountains was not caused by reactivated "ancient landslides" but rather by the Earth thrusting upward, according to a new study conducted by a group of Summit area homeowners.

The report — prepared by engineers, geologists and doctorate-level scientists, most of whom live in the area — flies in the face of preliminary data compiled by researchers from the disputed \$1.35 million Santa Cruz County Geologic Hazards Investigation.

Final results of that study — funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency under the auspices of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers — are not expected until December at the earliest, after pub-

lic comment and independent review of the report.

Until the findings of the investigation are released, hundreds of Summit homeowners remain in limbo, unable or unwilling to rebuild until the county receives conclusive data evaluating geologic risks in the mountains.

The county asked the Army engineers to evaluate Summit geological hazards shortly after the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake.

Sections of preliminary information compiled by the study's Technical Advisory Group theorize the area's Villa Del Monte subdivision is underlain with "ancient landslides" that could be reactivated during periods of heavy rain or earthquakes.

In its counter-study, the Villa Del Monte Emergency Homeown-

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ers Association contends the Technical Advisory Group's landslide hypothesis is scientifically unsound, and riddled with errors and "gross distortions." They say it is intended to promote the landslide-threat theory as a means of controlling growth in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The homeowners' association report raises the possibility that widespread cracking in the Summit terrain was not caused by movement of reawakened landslides, but by "tectonic upthrust," or the upward displacement of deformities in the Earth's plates.

The homeowners' review charges that advisory group scientists refused to consider the tectonic explanation because it didn't fit their preconceived notions of ancient landslides at the Summit.

The homeowners' document takes particular aim at preliminary reports compiled by geologists William Cotton and Associates and UC Santa Cruz earth scientist Gary Griggs: "Each report is rife with assertions about landslides, most of which have little, if any, basis in scientifically established data.

"There are many statements which are simply unscientific and are there only for their political value."

The county's top planning official, Dianne Guzman, disagreed with the assertion that political goals are behind the landslide theory. But, said Guzman, "of all the citizens' responses to highly technical work, I think this is one of the best presented ones I've ever

seen."

County Supervisor Jan Beautz, whose district encompasses much of the Summit, found the homeowners' association report to be "well done and professional, yet easy to read.

"It really shows how important this is to that community," said Beautz. "It's extraordinary that a neighborhood group has to put something like that together. I think they did a really good job."

Villa Del Monte Emergency Homeowners Association members believe they're being victimized by political upthrust administered by the county, although association president Henry Meyer conceded the association has no "smoking gun" which proves that the nearly two years of waiting are motivated by political and anti-growth interests.

"The fact that geology is being used as a method of land-use control has been told to me so many times that I'd have to be a dimwit not to accept the likelihood of that possibility," said Meyer.

He said both the county and advisory group researchers know the Santa Cruz Mountains are a geologically safe place to live, but neither wants to come out and say it.

"The objective should be to let the people know that the place is safe to live," said Meyer.

"After all of the testing, all of the rains (27 inches in February and March), all of the aftershocks, there has been no movement. ... Neither one has the gumption to say it, and the people, in the meantime, suffer and the political objectives of the county are filled," said Meyer.

And while the county awaits the study results, it continues to require rebuilders in the Summit to undergo rigorous and costly geological tests, sign waivers, or both — noted on deeds of trust — holding the county harmless for damages incurred in future seismic episodes there.

Summit residents say the waiver is "onerous," and have filed a class-action lawsuit against the county, claiming the requirement makes their property worthless in perpetuity. Many refuse to enter the county rebuilding permit process until the waiver is struck down.

Members of the Summit community told the Board of Supervisors last week that they are losing their patience, their money and their minds while awaiting the results of the hazards assessment.

Supervisor Beautz said she has "great concern" with the advisory group study's time line.

"People have waited too long, and there's a lot in the balance here," said Beautz. "By the same token, it is very important that the independent reviewers actually review the document. I hope (the reviewers are) dealing substantively with many of the questions of the report.

"If the delay is really to deal with many of the problems we've found in the report so far, then I think it's worth it. A lot of people are waiting."

Two of the study's three independent reviewers are being paid for their services by the Army Corps of Engineers, which has spent all but \$100,000 of its \$1.35 million budget.

The three "internationally known" scientists charged with evaluating the draft version of the final report are well aware of the controversy surrounding the situation, said one of the reviewers.

Nicholas Sitar, a professor of geo-technical engineering at UC Berkeley, declined to comment on the draft report, or the counter-study. Sitar did, however, say that his role as reviewer is to "make sure the work was done to the best technical ability."

To a degree, he said, the reviewers have to assume that "basic observations" provided by advisory group researchers are correct.

Summit homeowners, said Sitar, "obviously have some valid concerns and that need to be addressed. ... I understand they have some significant interest in the outcome (of the study).

But, he said, "it would be a mistake for me to be concerned about ... the different positions that the sides are taking in the political arena."

"I believe my responsibility is to make sure the people that have to make the decisions will have the best technical data, that we provide the best technical analysis available under the circumstances. And that we provide enough information about the implications of this so the people that have to make decisions can make the long-range decisions.

"For me to try to think that I should interpret something in a particular way because politically that is correct would be a tremendous mistake and unprofessional, to say the least," Sitar said.