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A Scotts Valley hazardous materials specialist is cleaned off after working with acid vapor.

HAZARDOUS materials Acid vapors cause evacuation

Sanitation workers sickened but OK

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SANTA CRUZ — Residents of several homes on Chestnut Street in downtown Santa Cruz were evacuated early Wednesday morning after a strong acid vaporized inside a city garbage truck.

The 300 block and its dozen homes were cordoned off by the Santa Cruz Fire Department officials after an acid, possibly hydrochloric acid, reacted with garbage in the truck about 6:30 a.m., releasing corrosive vapors, said

Santa Cruz fire Capt. Mike Ditano.

Residents on the odd-numbered side of the street, where the fumes were drifting, were evacuated. They were allowed back in their homes after the acid was neutralized later in the morning, said Wayne Petersen, battalion chief.

Those who stayed were told to remain in their homes with their windows closed while a hazardous-materials team from the Scotts Valley Fire Department worked for several hours to identify and then neutralize the acid.

The vapors sickened two Santa Cruz sanitation workers on the truck, Larry Phillips and Dennis Ghio, said Ken Evans, Sanitation Department foreman.

Phillips said the two were near the beginning of their route when the acid

was unknowingly collected.

Phillips was riding on the back of the truck near the hopper when more than a gallon of the acid poured out, vaporizing when it hit the metal truck, he said.

Phillips said he felt nauseated and his chest tightened when he inhaled the fumes.

It was the fourth time in six years he was exposed to acids while working for the city Sanitation Department, he said.

"People throw all kinds of things away that are hazardous to us, not just toxins," said Phillips. "People might start getting a clue, we're not just machines out there. We're people."

Both men were taken by ambulance to Dominican Hospital, where they were treated and released, Evans said.