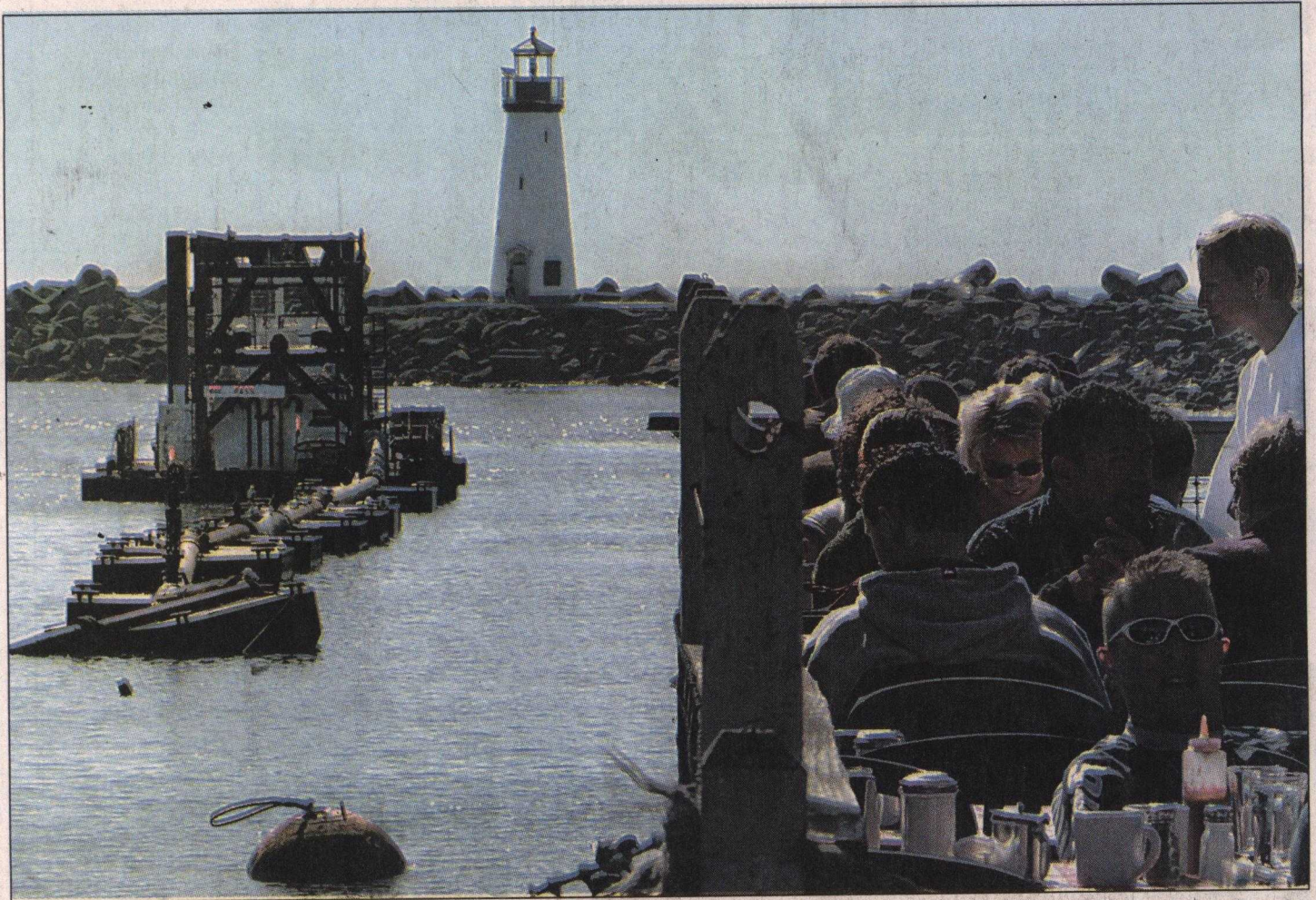


WHAT'S THAT SMELL?



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Diners at Aldo's Harbor Restaurant enjoy lunch while unaware of the olfactory discomfort recently wreaked by the harbor dredge.

Harbor stench prompts air board hearing

By DAN WHITE
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Harbor neighbors say they're fed up with "potentially harmful" vapors and the rotten-egg smell from sand dredged from the harbor mouth.

In response, the Monterey Bay Unified Air Pollution Control District may be wading back into an issue that some neighbors and harbor visitors have complained about for years.

A small group of neighbors and other concerned residents appeared before the air board last week, contending the situation is worse than a public nuisance. They said they worry hydrogen sulfide vapors from decomposed seaweed in the dredge spoils could be harming their health.

Richard Rivoir, who lives across the street from the beach where some dredged materials are pumped, contends the vapors may be responsible for a variety of his health problems. Other area residents wrote letters or testified before the board, saying the fumes from decomposing seaweed and other organic material have made them ill.

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The harbor was built in 1964 and the Army Corps of Engineers handled the dredging until the harbor district took on the duties in 1986. Harbor operations manager Kimbra Eldridge said the district has a duty to not only keep the harbor mouth open but to replenish nearby beaches with the trapped sand.

Rivoir's longtime complaints were a major factor in the Santa Cruz Port District agreeing in 1997 to install a large pipe that dumps the dredge spoils about 400 feet offshore.

Neighbors that year complained to the pollution board about headaches, eye problems and other illnesses they blamed on hydrogen sulfide from materials pumped on shore.

Eldridge concedes the 1980s and much of the 1990s "stank" at the district, but insists the 400-foot outfall pipe improved the situa-

tion. She also refers to a 1997 harbor consultant's study that found the hydrogen sulfide levels in the area were safe.

Neighbors say the study was biased and conducted on a day when the stench was minimal.

Rivoir agreed the outfall pipe has improved matters. But he said the problem gets worse when the pipe breaks and dredge spoils are pumped on the nearby beach.

The air pollution district noticed a spike in stench complaints after the December storms broke the pipe. Eldridge said the district had no choice but to pump some bad-smelling spoils onshore because it was an emergency and the harbor mouth had to be opened.

Air board staffers agreed the emergency justified this temporary solution.

But the pipe broke again last week, and the dredge crew has been pumping sand onto the beach since then. Eldridge insists the more recent dredging hasn't been smelly.

She said the district pumps some dredge materials to the beach even when the pipe is operational but only if the materials don't smell bad and when prevailing winds won't blow the smell into the neighborhoods — a claim disputed by some neighbors.

Eldridge said the district wants to work with neighbors and that she is generally supportive of their demands.

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Harbor

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Rivoir also hopes for an amicable solution. He's not the only voice criticizing the district. Nearby resident William Gloege said the fumes "make you want to throw up. You can't run on the beach because it gets in your lungs. We need to do something about this. It's time."

No action was taken at last week's air board hearing. County Supervisor Ellen Pirie, who sits on the board, complained that members were given a pile of materials on late notice, and asked the board to meet again next month to discuss complaints.

She said it was confusing that one side spoke of serious health concerns while the other side suggested the dredging was perfectly safe.

"We aren't in the position to figure this out by the seat of our pants," she said.

Douglas Quetin, an air board staffer, said the board receives "calls of hysteria every year about the dredge smell." He said the pollution board has promised "a full and open hearing."

The pollution board represents Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito counties, with authority over air contamination complaints, from industries and other sources. The 11-member board, which includes six area coun-

ty supervisors, can impose civil penalties, refer cases to criminal prosecution and seek injunctions.

The district has the power to levy fines, and did so against the harbor district over "public nuisance" smell complaints in 1997. The amount of the fine was not available last week.

At last week's meeting, harbor district consultant Steve Gomez insisted hydrogen sulfide can be detected as a "stinky" odor long before it is considered harmful, and that the gas, to cause health problems, would need to be 1,000 times the concentration at which it could first be smelled in the air.

At the hearing, some audience members laughed when Gomez said that some of the eye irritation and other complaints could be linked to household chemicals. He also charged the complainers of scaring themselves with out-of-context Internet information on hydrogen sulfides.

Rivoir and others say they want a new count.

The group also wants a sturdy new pipe, and signs at the site with the pollution district's number on it and a warning that "hydrogen sulfide gas is present and this material may be hazardous to your health, especially pregnant women and children."

Eldridge said she was willing to work with the neighbors to address their concerns, and didn't have a problem with signs listing the



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

A harbor dredge pipe snakes along Twin Lakes Beach. Residents nearby have been complaining of the foul odors from dredged silt and sand.

pollution district's contact information.

Doug Mayfield, one of several managers of the Crow's Nest, which leases space from the harbor district, insists he's noticed no especially bad smells recently.

"Over the years there have been times when I'll go out and say, 'What are they

dredging up?' but I haven't noticed it this winter. We haven't had customers (lately) who say, 'We don't want to be sitting outside.'"

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