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Hearing tonight on report that beryllium plant is safe

By Tony Davis

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Homes are rising across the street from the Brush Ceramic Products plant as the South Side facility faces a public hearing on a state report saying that it poses no environmental hazards.

The plant's general manager said he has worked closely with home builder D.R. Horton and will work closely with home buyers to answer questions about the plant's operations and safety measures.

At a public hearing tonight, state Department of Health Services officials will lay out their report's conclusion that the plant won't cause health problems because averages of soil and air monitoring data show no concentrations of the toxic material beryllium that exceed health standards.

"We will have a communications plan about how the plant works and what sort of protective systems are in place," said John Scheatzle, Brush's general manager. "We'll hold sessions in the conference room for people who would like to come and ask questions. D.R. Horton salespeople have toured the plant, so they can answer questions."

Activists who have opposed Brush say it makes no sense to put homes near a plant they feel is unsafe.

"The city approved these homes without any consideration about what might happen in the future," said Brian Blank, a geologist and a member of the Environmental Justice Action Group. "The city should have done more testing first."

Brush Ceramic Products, part of Cleveland-based Brush Wellman Engineered Materials Inc., is the nation's largest producer of beryllium oxide products. Its local plant is at 6100 S. Tucson Blvd., near East Valencia Road.

Beryllium, a naturally occurring metal used in industrial applications, can be toxic when particles are inhaled.

Thirty-five Tucson workers at the plant have contracted incurable chronic beryllium disease, which slowly suffocates its victims. At least two have died.

Company officials have said most of those sickened by beryllium exposure worked at the plant in the 1980s, when the metal's toxicity was not well-understood and worker safety gear wasn't required.

Since the early 1990s, workers have been protected by respirators, protective suits and other measures, while filtration systems protect the public from beryllium dust, officials said.

Home plans OK'd in June

D.R. Horton officials didn't return phone calls about the Tres Pueblos subdivision, which features homes priced from \$130,000 to \$200,000. The City Council rezoned the land for 595 homes on 115 acres last December.

Another 310 homes are planned just north of the plant outside that subdivision, according to a map in the State Health Department report.

A City Council member said he hopes the presence of homes inspires Pima County officials to be more thoughtful when they approve a new operating permit for the Brush plant.

IF YOU GO

What: Brush Ceramic Products meeting. Officials of the Pima County Department of Health and Environmental Quality, the Tucson Fire Department, home builder D.R. Horton and the Sunnyside Unified School District will answer questions.

When: 6:30 tonight.

Where: Sunnyside High School auditorium, 1725 E. Bilby Road.

The council approved the rezoning from industrial to residential because the area would automatically revert to residential by August 2005, said Councilman Steve Leal, who represents the area.

It "would be great" if homes ultimately force Brush from the area, said Pima County Supervisor Richard Elias, who sits on the county Board of Health. "It would be an anomaly to have that kind of residential use inside a highly industrial area," Elias said.

But Yolanda Herrera, Sunnyside Neighborhood Association president and a building industry design consultant, said she has no problems with homes near the plant.

"D.R. Horton hired their own people to come in and look at the health issue," she said. "They won't want to build houses if an area is in question."

The state study analyzed soil samples, air samples and smokestack emission test results taken in and around the plant between 1999 and 2004.

The Environmental Justice Action Group takes issue with the report, in part on the grounds that the use of average concentrations gives short shrift to two soil samples taken in 1999 - on the new home site - that exceeded state standards.

The group criticized the state report for casting doubt on the validity of wipe samples that the Sunnyside Unified School District took at various school locations near the plant, which lies within a half-mile of six schools that serve 5,600 students.

The state report, however, said the soil results didn't warrant more analysis because the state standard overestimates the health risk and is far stricter than the federal soil standards.

The wipe tests measured material that built up over 15 years in locations where students and employees have only limited access, the state report said.

County Supervisor Ramon Valadez, who also represents the area, said the county permit will require Brush to conduct continuous monitoring of air outside the plant site.

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