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Eau de Upgrade Petroleum smell permeates road paving progress

By Cathy Dausman



Measure K replacing trucks Photo Cathy Dausman

Sometimes the sweet smell of progress smells a little less ... sweet. Take the road paving process in Moraga, for example. Heavy machinery bearing rather unrefined petroleum product rolls along the area as the town undertakes its three year plan to upgrade street surfaces. About the same time, Pacific Gas and Electric Co. spokesperson Tamar Sarkissian confirmed her company began fielding calls from Moraga residents who reported an odor similar to gas.

"We received more than 20 calls since August 20, and have sent out a gas service representative each time to investigate," she said. "Each time, it has been confirmed that the odor is not coming from natural gas. It has been determined this is actually an odor coming from a local street repaving job, and not related to PG&E," she said.

Moraga-Orinda Fire Department also received one call near the end of August from a resident concerned about the smell. MOFD Fire Marshall Kathy Leonard said PG&E had opened a utility vault to complete an upgrade, possibly venting gas, albeit safely, along a stretch of St. Mary's Road near Bollinger Canyon Road.

Leonard said MOFD had posted a fire watch as required.

Mike Koenig, project manager for VSS International says he "absolutely" knows the truck contents smell.

"I don't know why [it smells the way it does]," he said, but "wherever the truck is [the smell is there too]."

The trucks carry a Department of Transportation sign designating the contents as hot asphalt, and bearing the placard number 3257.

"The asphalt is heated to 325 degrees," Koenig added.

"There's not much they can do [about the smell]," added Ryan Perry of Harris Associates. Perry did say he'd suggest the Moraga street paving Facebook page to include information about related petroleum smells.

Naturally, safety is everyone's foremost concern: "Safety is our top priority," PG&E's Sarkissian said, "and we take these kinds of calls seriously. Any time a customer suspects they may be smelling gas, we encourage them to call 1-800-PGE-5000 immediately."

Leonard said while MOFD fire department trucks have equipment used to "sniff" for suspicious gas smells, she added "please, any time people are concerned [about a gas smell] they should call 911."

Want to Learn More?

Petroleum refinement, from crude oil to gasoline is discussed online at:

<http://science.howstuffworks.com/environmental/energy/oil-refining.htm>.

The placard designation system ("what's in that truck?") is explained online at

<http://tinyurl.com/lshub76>.

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