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Hillside Slides Threaten Country Club Houses

By Sophie Braccini



The trail below the country club homes shows damage from the slides. Photo Rob Lucacher

At the beginning of March Tim and Eileen Alford made a tough decision, leaving their home in the Moraga Country Club they felt might not be safe anymore, and moving themselves and their three children in with friends. They were afraid their home was prone to landslides from the onslaught from the recent rains.

Since January the property owner of the land next to theirs, East Bay Municipal Utility District, had noticed landslides and had agreed with the East Bay Regional Park District that the trail along Moraga Creek needed to be closed, but the agency only recently noticed the impact on homes with backyards that abut the trail. The Alford's home along Augusta Drive needed to be "red-tagged" - deemed uninhabitable - and others are at risk.

Alford says that around March 8 he noticed that "a portion of our deck was leaning," and then started to inspect the ground behind his property. "I noticed cracks in the EBMUD ground that started to affect our foundations," he said. Alford and his wife felt it was unsafe for the family to stay in the house and moved out. The town of Moraga was contacted, the house inspected and red-tagged. Alford feels that since EBMUD knew about the slides since January, the agency should have informed the adjacent property owners.

"We observed a small slide along the trail by the creek," says Andrea Pook, EBMUD spokeswoman, about what happened in January. "We decided [with EBRPD, which owns the trail] to close it and commissioned an initial study to look into the slide." Pook says EBMUD learned that there are existing slides in the whole area, and plans to work with the park district to determine the extent of the slide.

EBMUD further indicated that they were informed in March of movement up the hill, close to the homes. The agency sent an engineering team there on March 10, but the soil was so saturated and constantly shifting that there was no possibility of remediation. "We do plan to go out below the houses, remove the trees so they don't fall," says Pook.

EBMUD say they've hired experts to continue further investigation, but that the soil needs to be drier in order to do so.

"Houses are on private property, and these are natural landslides," says Pook, adding that deciding on responsibility is not as important at this time as keeping the area safe and keeping an eye on the creek.

Alford and his family are not certain of what the next steps will be. "We have to figure out what is

best for our family," he says. "We are lucky we are healthy. The question is, is the house livable, and if not where does the responsibility lie?"

He adds that typically insurance companies do not cover landslides. A local lawyer who said he'd rather remain anonymous confirmed that no responsibility is involved when it is just Mother Nature doing her thing; only when human-made activities or negligence can be proven can the responsibility of a neighbor, like EBMUD, be attributed.

EBMUD said that in January the only information they had involved the trail, and that they were in the midst of initial studies when the situation worsened the weekend of March 12-13. "We would have informed the homeowners," says Pook, "but we didn't get to that point." The spokesperson added that the agency is now focusing on communication with all the neighbors and is asking residents to stay clear of the area.

The State of Emergency declared by the town of Moraga on March 16 covers the entire town, including "other storm related damage" such as the landslide on EBMUD property along Moraga Creek behind the homes on Augusta Drive.

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