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Politics, asbestos mix in foothills

A long-divisive debate about growth spills over into the region's asbestos controversy.

By Mary Lynne Vellinga -- Bee Staff Writer
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State Sens. Deborah Ortiz and Dave Cox recently attended the same legislative hearing on naturally occurring asbestos, but judging from their reactions, they could have been on opposite sides of the Capitol.

Afterward, Cox expressed concern that asbestos dangers were being overblown by anti-growth "activists" who testified at the hearing.

Where Cox saw activists, Ortiz saw "soccer moms" who live near asbestos veins churned up by development in El Dorado Hills. She said the risks of breathing asbestos fibers should not be downplayed.

"I happen to believe that asbestos is very serious in general, and this is a particularly problematic type of asbestos," she said.

The lawmakers' differing reactions suggest how politics could affect the response of elected leaders to the issue of naturally occurring asbestos in the fast-growing foothills.

The El Dorado citizenry also appears divided. Some who have contacted The Bee in recent weeks say the county is being singled out for no good reason, putting their property values at risk. They point out that naturally occurring asbestos is present in many counties in the foothills and along the coast.

Others say they are worried and want more information about the risks. They fault the county for not acting more aggressively to disseminate information about asbestos and to prevent exposure.

Cox is a Fair Oaks Republican who represents El Dorado Hills and Folsom, two communities where naturally occurring asbestos has been disturbed by development. Ortiz is a Sacramento Democrat who chairs the Senate Health Committee.

"Ms. Ortiz feels very passionately and has strong feelings; we just draw different conclusions," Cox said.

"I have a far more urban, environmental perspective," Ortiz offered.

In El Dorado Hills, Republicans like Cox dominate local politics. Elected officials tend to be pro-business, and the local supervisors recently adopted a general plan that could mean more than 80,000 new residents by 2025, many of them in El Dorado Hills.

But a vocal minority has challenged the growth policies, and El Dorado politicians say they're concerned growth foes will exaggerate the risks of asbestos to build support for their view.

"One of the more contentious debates (in El Dorado County) has been land use," said Ray McNally, a GOP consultant. "Politically, I'm sure the no-growthers will seize on the asbestos issue."

U.S. Rep. John Doolittle, the Roseville Republican who represents El Dorado Hills, has expressed

similar fears.

Doolittle recently came out in support of a measure by U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, a Democrat, to authorize \$40 million for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to locate natural asbestos deposits, establish remediation plans and determine exposure standards.

But even as he did so, he accused environmentalists of "salivating" over the issue as "another arrow in the quiver to pierce the heart of growth."

Doolittle could not be reached for comment last week, but his press aide, Laura Blackann, reiterated his position.

"Congressman Doolittle wants to make sure any action taken in El Dorado is based on facts and not on overzealous environmentalists looking to exploit this issue and stunt growth," Blackann said.

Some of those at odds with county leaders say their pro-growth bent has blinded them to the seriousness of the asbestos hazard.

"Politically, they're trying to crush (the issue)," said former El Dorado County Supervisor Sam Bradley, a critic of the county's new general plan.

"You've got supervisors that are bought and paid for by the development community. They're the ones saying, 'build, build, build.' It's the economy of our county."

Ortiz called the county's response over the years to reports of a potential asbestos hazard "very defensive."

"I think this is one of those issues that is not Democrat or Republican," she said. "Soccer moms in El Dorado County still want protection for their kids."

For their part, local elected leaders say they, too, view asbestos through the lens of human health, not politics.

"It's not a political issue, it's not a land-use issue, it's a health and safety issue," said El Dorado County Supervisor Helen Baumann. "That's been the position of the entire Board of Supervisors."

But the health risks of periodic exposure to naturally occurring asbestos remain unclear. And the lack of concrete data leaves plenty of room for politics to fill the vacuum.

The federal EPA recently released the results of air testing that found El Dorado Hills residents were exposed to significantly elevated levels of airborne asbestos when they played sports, jogged or biked in popular Community Park and nearby schools.

But the federal scientists can't say exactly how much of this type of asbestos exposure it takes to cause disease, or what percentage of people exposed might get sick with cancer and other illnesses.

In the absence of such data, some politicians - including Cox and Baumann - say it's appropriate to continue building on asbestos-containing rock and soil, as long as dust controls are imposed and bare dirt is capped after construction.

Cox's vast 1st Senate District includes many Sierra communities affected because they are undergoing development in geologic belts where asbestos occurs. Those areas include portions of Amador and Calaveras counties, the foothills of El Dorado and Placer counties and the city of Folsom in Sacramento County.

In many situations, the concerns can be addressed with appropriate landscaping, Cox said. "If you pave over it, it takes care of the issue," he added.

Others, including Ortiz, have their doubts. "I think we're a long way from saying watering down the dust is safe," Ortiz said.

She added, "It's premature to say a no-growth policy is a solution, just as I think it's too soon to say building on and around it is completely safe."

"The people who are already there deserve answers, and the people who are proposing to build there deserve answers. The only way you get there is with sound science."

Ortiz is carrying legislation that would direct a team of state specialists to develop ways to assess and minimize the risk to residents.

Until now, the issue of naturally occurring asbestos hasn't played much of a role in the region's growth battles. Even in El Dorado County, where local officials for years have imposed dust controls on construction, asbestos takes a back seat to concerns such as traffic and smog.

But following the EPA test results in El Dorado Hills and recent disclosures that asbestos may be present in a broader swath of the region, that may be changing.

In 2004, the same type of asbestos found in El Dorado Hills - a particularly potent form called amphibole - was unearthed at the site of a high school planned to serve Folsom's Empire Ranch development, prompting the Sacramento Air Quality Management District to impose special dust controls on construction there.

Now, state geologists say asbestos-containing bedrock extends through much of Folsom south to Rancho Murieta, through thousands of acres Folsom plans to annex and develop.

As a result, opponents of a plan to build almost 2,000 homes in Rancho Murieta now list the potential presence of asbestos as one of their concerns.

"I've got two small children, and I don't have any desire for them to get exposed," said Brad Sample, an ecological risk assessor who lives in Rancho Murieta.

"If Sacramento County does something that creates (asbestos) exposure, they're going to have a lot of liability because they knew ahead of time," Sample added. "The county's responsibility is significant."

Developer Gerry Kamilos said asbestos has yet to be found in Rancho Murieta, but if it is, the builders will impose dust controls.

Like many in the development industry, Kamilos pointed out that serpentine, the greenish rock that often bears asbestos, is ubiquitous in the state. So much so, it's the state rock.

"If it's found, the way in which you proceed is with construction protocols," Kamilos said. "I don't think it's very complex at all."

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