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Landfill Blamed for Student Illnesses Sun Valley Parents, Other Groups, Protest Proposed Expansion Plans

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LOS ANGELES - For Mayela Rodriguez, the smell is constant, oppressive, inescapable.

"It smells like garbage," she said through a translator. "Sometimes it smells like something burning, but I look outside and I don't see that it's burning."

But the worst part of living across the street from a Sun Valley landfill, she feels, is the effect on her children's health. Her son Carlos, a student at Sun Valley's Fernangeles Elementary School, woke up one day last year looking very pale with blood on his pillow.

"We immediately took him to the doctor," Rodriguez said. "He said it was airborne allergies."

Those airborne illnesses have left a medicine cabinet in the school nurse's office overflowing with inhalers and other asthma medication. The school needed an additional cabinet, but principal Karen Jaye knew she could line her corridors with cabinets and not even dent the bigger problem - a school full of students missing more and more classes and full days because they are sick.

Something had to be done about air pollution, Jaye decided, especially about the towering Bradley Landfill looming behind the school yard.

Waste Management, the largest trash disposal company in North America, owns and operates Bradley and wants to raise the landfill - already 100 feet above ground - by another 43 feet. The Houston-based company also wants to build a permanent sorting facility where recyclables would be separated from trash before being transferred.

Those plans have galvanized Fernangeles' parents and teachers, who have joined other community groups and sought help from Neighborhood Legal Services to fight Waste Management's proposed expansion as it wends its way through a Los Angeles City Council review.

Residents are planning a vigil to show their opposition to the landfill, carrying flashlights instead of candles. They said they fear candles might ignite escaping methane gas.

"Trash is really a volatile issue," said Waste Management spokeswoman Katherine Cole. "Folks want us to pick it up, and they don't want us to put it down. They especially don't want us to put it down where they live."

That dilemma frames the bigger policy issue, said Legal Services attorney Josh Stehlik. "What's the city going to do with its trash? Officials keep asking, 'If not Bradley, then where?' It's not the residents' responsibility to decide that."

Fernangeles counselor Maria Sooy agrees: "This is not a Sun Valley issue," she said. "This is a city of Los Angeles issue." The battleground now, though, is clearly in Sun Valley.

"My asthma numbers here are 10 times the other schools I've worked in," Jaye said.

More than 100 of Fernangeles Elementary's 1,200 students are on asthma medication, and that number may not reflect the full extent of the problem. In low-income areas like Sun Valley, at least 50 percent of children with asthma likely go undiagnosed, studies show.

Sun Valley, 18 miles northwest of downtown Los Angeles, is a predominantly Latino, working-class community where some residents feel the area's ethnic and economic makeup is the reason their neighborhood has become a dumping ground for Los Angeles.

"Many residents are vulnerable, fearful and simply don't know what the processes are and how to become involved," Stehlik said.

The area is home to some 30 landfills, most of them closed. For 50 years beginning in the 1920s, most of the stone, sand and gravel used in Los Angeles construction came from quarries there. The open pits those spent quarries left behind have since become home to Los Angeles' trash, and the problem has been compounded by the area's concentration of polluting businesses, such as chrome plating, concrete pulverizing and auto junkyards.

Bradley may be the most visible contributor to pollution in Sun Valley, but not the only one.

"There are a number of other businesses that are contributing to this," Jaye said. "But they're not asking for a 43-foot extension."

The elementary school has almost twice the national average of childhood asthma, and teachers say they also have seen a worsening of other health problems like nosebleeds and allergies.

And those problems may get worse, they say, if the City Council approves Waste Management's proposed expansion. "We typically refer to the pile of trash as Mount Cardenas," Sooy said, referring to Councilman Tony Cardenas who represents the area.

Calling Bradley a landfill "makes it sound a little nice," Sooy said. "It's a dump."

Cole said Waste Management has made unprecedented concessions to Sun Valley residents. The company, which employs 240 people at the site, has agreed to build a fully enclosed recycling center from "green" materials, and it has retrofitted most of its trucks with clean-air technology.

The landfill already produces enough "green" power, using the methane gas from the site, to provide electricity for 10,000 homes a year, Cole said. Should the expansion be approved, the company will pay approximately \$14,000 per day and an additional \$100,000 annually for the recycling center, she said.

"It's perplexing to me why, when we've offered so much, the only option the opposition is coming to the table with is for Waste Management to shut down and get out of town," Cole said.

Some residents say those concessions were only made in reaction to community criticism.

Cole acknowledges one of the critics' points: The Bradley Landfill is remarkably close to Sun Valley's population. "It's unusual for it to be so close to residences and schools," she said. "There's no other open, active landfills in the state of California where residents are so close to the facility."

Waste Management released its draft Environmental Impact Report for the proposed extension in January, concluding that the impact on health will be minor, Stehlik said.

"They're saying, 'You can't really pinpoint what's caused by us and what's caused by these similar businesses,'" he said, adding that Waste Management's draft environmental impact report indicates air pollution will be unavoidable. "But you have to look at the cumulative effect," he continued. "The source of harm is not what's at issue. What's at issue is that you have an already impacted community."

Because the ultimate decision on the landfill likely will come down to a City Council vote, residents have focused on how Cardenas, their council representative, will vote.

"Since this is Cardenas' district, they will vote the way he votes," Sooy said.

Cardenas is "the key decision maker," Stehlik said. "His position will carry a lot of weight."

So far, Cardenas has not indicated how he will vote. His office said he is reviewing Waste Management's environmental impact report.

Sooy said politicians with ties to the area used those connections to win elections. Then they abandon the very people who put them in office. Cardenas' Latino immigrant roots were a central part of his campaign for City Council, she said.

"He's not standing up for a poor immigrant community, and in so doing he's shaming his parents," Sooy said.

Cardenas was unavailable for an interview. He asked that questions be submitted in writing and responded by e-mail.

"My main priority has always been to make sure the community has a voice in any decision made on the fate of the landfill," Cardenas wrote. "Residents have many concerns that need to be addressed specifically, and I personally will be hosting community meetings to make sure the everyday rumblings of Bradley will be center stage."

A controversial 11-member community advisory committee was formed to study the proposed expansion and make recommendations to the City Council. Waste Management has contributed \$125,000 to finance the committee's work. Three of the committee's members are Waste Management employees.

Committee member Glenn Lopez, a professor at the UCLA School of Medicine, said he thinks "landfills pose a health threat to populations. But what I've learned is that asthma's not the problem."

He said asthma rates are high throughout Los Angeles County.

"There is no known study out there that correlates an increased rate of asthma to landfills," he said. He added, however, that he would be "really concerned with what's going on underneath all those piles of garbage. I'm really concerned about groundwater contamination."

Ecologist Ellen Mackey, a Sun Valley resident and a committee member, said water contamination is a big problem.

"You have 30 landfills over the largest groundwater basin in Southern California, and Burbank, our downstream neighbor, gets 50 percent of its water from Sun Valley."

With so many polluting industries in Sun Valley, health issues are complicated, she said.

"But you can't say it has nothing to do with the landfill," she said. "That would be incorrect."

The committee she sits on "is a joke," she said. "They all have ties to Waste Management."

Mackey said Cardenas' office wants a committee consensus on each vote, which would give Waste Management employees veto power on every decision.

Cardenas said he has designated Sun Valley an "Environmental Justice Improvement Area" to crack down "on the

concentration of industrial businesses, junkyards, gravel pits and recycle centers."

He also said he has won funding for an air monitoring project to study pollution in the area.

"We're still waiting for some action on that," Sooy said of the project. "More and more parents are saying my child needs to take medication during the day."

And illnesses continue to take a toll at Fernangeles Elementary, Jaye said.

"Most of the asthmatics have very poor attendance because when they start wheezing, their parents keep them home," she said.

"It's not that these kids can't learn," Jaye said.

With all of the controversy surrounding the landfill, parents like Mayela Rodriquez remain focused on their main worry.

"We have so many kids who are sick," she said. "What's going to happen to these kids?"

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