North Ridge Superfund site

Legacy of Asbestos

By LACEY JARRELL H&N Staff Reporter  Jul 17, 2016  (3)

It was a dream come true.

Almost.

When Arizona residents Richard and Susan Gibson married in April 1999, the two lived in separate homes. As a celebration of a new chapter in their lives, each sold their home and the newlywed couple honeymooned in Klamath Falls, shopping for property.
Susan said from the time she was a young girl, she had yearned to leave dusty Arizona and to plant herself among the trees in Oregon.

Two months after their wedding, the couple closed on a $30,000, 3.6-acre empty lot at North Ridge Estates, located 3 miles north of Klamath Falls. Together, the couple designed an 1,800-square-foot home to nestle in the ponderosa pines that shrouded their property.

Construction crews broke ground in October.

At the time, the land, which had been fallow for nearly 20 years, was covered in a thick layer of pine needles and tall grass.

“It wasn’t until they cleared it off that we started seeing shards of stuff,” Susan said.

In 2001, just one year after the couple moved into their new house, the first evidence of asbestos contamination at North Ridge Estates was discovered.

Environmental experts eventually discovered tons of asbestos-containing material littered across the landscape Even more was buried — in some areas, more than 15 feet deep.

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) documents classify asbestos as a carcinogenic heat- and fire-resistant fibrous mineral that builds up in the lungs and causes lung cancer, mesothelioma and asbestosis, a non-cancer disease that causes shortness of breath, coughing and permanent lung damage.

Almost a decade after the contamination was discovered, the 171-acre subdivision was designated as a Superfund site — a location so polluted with toxic materials, the nation gives it priority for wide-scale environmental cleanup.

The contamination forced most residents of North Ridge to leave. The three families that stayed lost all value in their homes and became marooned in a neighborhood of empty houses, holding only the memories of the families that built them.

“We both sold our homes and put our money together. This is our life savings,” Susan said motioning to her house, “and now it’s worth 10 bucks.”
North Ridge history

The North Ridge saga dates back to the 1940s when the U.S. Department of Defense constructed an 800-acre Marine Recuperation Barracks, 3 miles north of Klamath Falls, to house and treat World War II soldiers suffering from tropical diseases, such as malaria. The complex consisted of 82 buildings that included a sewage treatment plant, brig, hospital, swimming pool and 30 barracks.

The barracks — constructed with asbestos board siding, asbestos insulation, asbestos roof and floor materials, and buried asbestos-insulated steam pipes — were used for only two years, between 1944 and 1946.

From 1947 to 1964, the site was used as the Oregon Technical Institute vocational college.

Real estate developer Melvin Bercot Kenneth Partnership (MBK) purchased the property in 1977, and began demolishing the barracks. The development group subdivided and began building at the site in 1993.

According to Judy Smith, EPA community involvement coordinator, the Klamath Falls landfill would not accept asbestos materials and concerns about health risks to workers led the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to allow MBK to dispose of the materials onsite.

EPA documents said MBK was ordered to bury and secure the barrack debris. Rather than deeply burying all the asbestos-containing material, much of the rubble from bulldozed buildings was ground into the soil.

In 1978, it was reported to the DEQ that asbestos debris was accumulating at the property and that heavy equipment driving over demolition debris was causing a great amount of “white, fluffy” insulation materials to become airborne.

Smith said although the EPA issued a compliance order in September 1979, requiring MBK’s asbestos disposal and maintenance to conform to national standards for hazardous air pollutants, there is no indication the disposal requirements were met.

Smith noted that activities at North Ridge occurred before state or federal environmental cleanup laws had been adopted.
Despite whatever efforts were made to bury the toxic materials, frost heave — a phenomenon in which freezing temperatures cause material embedded in soil to migrate upward — continually pushes asbestos to the surface.

It wasn’t until 2001, until after several homes, including the Gibsons’, had been built that the extent of the contamination was known. Since 2003, the EPA has removed about 60 tons of asbestos containing materials from the ground surface.

Although almost every inch of land at North Ridge Estates shows evidence of its toxic history, EPA documents say about 96 percent of the contamination still remains in the soil at a depth of 2 to 4 feet.

**New cleanup effort**

This week, specially licensed crews will start a $30 million, three-year cleanup at the site. The first construction phase is expected to run through October; following seasons in 2017 and ’18 will run between May and October.

Because contamination is present throughout the site’s topsoil, contractors will excavate at least 2 feet — up to a maximum of 4 feet — of soil before laying down a protective fabric and backfilling the land with fresh soil dug from an off-site pit.

A 2-foot cap of clean soil will protect the site for at least 150 years, according to Smith.

In an effort to purify the entire subdivision, contractors will also remove homes’ septic systems, driveways, porches and trees. At least one house will be completely demolished.

**Tons of contamination**

The three-year remediation project is expected to dig out enough contaminated soil to fill more than 123 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

Dennis and Gail Bailey, who purchased a 3-acre North Ridge property and built a $245,000, 2,350-square-foot custom log cabin, say they are frustrated about how extensive the construction will be because several small remediation projects have already been done at their property.

Similar to the Gibsons, Dennis and Gail sold their separate homes to pay for their North Ridge dream home.
The couple said they were drawn to the subdivision because of its mature pine stands and its close proximity to Klamath Falls, where both retired from the Klamath Falls City Schools District.

“It’s 3 miles from downtown, yet we felt we were in the woods where we wanted to be,” Gail said.

Dennis said the cabin’s wall logs were stacked about six high when an asbestos wrapped steam pipe was discovered in a neighbor’s yard.

“The pipe wrap was extremely dangerous, and the pipes ran all through the area,” Smith said.

Gail said she didn’t have any thoughts about halting construction once the process was under way.

Dennis explained that one of the biggest challenges the couple initially faced was financing a loan for the cabin.

“It was next to impossible,” Dennis said. “It took two years to get the financing put together. We thought, ‘Holy moly, here we are halfway through, we don’t want to stop this process. We’ve been through a lot to get this thing.’ ”

Dennis said the couple does not believe North Ridge’s asbestos hazard is that great, although they have spent several years wondering how and when the site would be fully cleaned.

“We like it up here,” Gail said. “This was kind of the dream, and we trusted when the EPA said they were going to come in and clean it all up. We thought it would be done a lot sooner.”

Although the entire subdivision is still littered with asbestos, crews have visited the Baileys home several times. According to Gail, specially trained crews grid their property and walked it, picking up
asbestos by hand. After ground testing, crews returned with heavy equipment and began overhauling the couple’s front yard and areas behind the house.

“They dug down 3 feet — 5 feet in some spots — and then brought dirt back in to cover it up. We thought that was going to be it,” Gail said.

The widespread contamination has made it impossible for the couple to sell their house or to find a bank willing to fund a refinance. Gail said despite the couple’s frustration, the cleanup is necessary for their house to get a “clean bill of health.”

“We’re financially stuck,” Dennis said.

Class-action lawsuit

After the mass contamination was discovered in 2001, 13 North Ridge families filed a class-action lawsuit against MBK. Families who opted to leave their newly built homes after the suit closed in 2006 were paid .88 cents on the dollar for their appraised value, according to Susan.

“It was heart-wrenching. It was very difficult because it was such a beautiful spot and it was where people wanted to retire,” said Smith, who still refers to each of North Ridge’s abandoned parcels by the name of the family who developed it.

Those that stayed were compensated 10 percent of their home’s appraised value at the time.

The Gibsons said they stayed at North Ridge because, at the time, EPA estimated the site could be cleaned in two to three years.

“We thought, ‘Good, that’ll be about the end of the time we wanted to be in Oregon, and we’ll sell our house and move on — go back to Arizona maybe,’ ” said Susan, noting that the couple’s children and grandchildren still live in the southwestern state.

The Gibsons say they understand the EPA gave them information based on what was known at the time, but they’ve regretted the decision to not take the buyout.

“They didn’t know, and we didn’t know the scope of this,” Susan said. “If we had known that the two to three years was going to turn into 10, 12 or 14 years, we would have not stayed.”
Even as construction gets underway, the light at the end of the tunnel remains dim. Along with the remedial construction that removes and replaces each property’s lawn and other outdoor features, crews will also remove the longstanding pine trees that give the homes much of their charm.

Only trees referred to as “legacy trees,” that have been identified as being onsite when the barracks were in place, will be left. Experts believe the newer trees may have asbestos embedded around their roots, and trees that don’t qualify as “legacy” will be sawed at the base and their stumps will be removed with the ground excavation.

“Out of our almost 80 mature pines, I think they are going to leave between 15 and 20,” Dennis said.

Susan expects only about one-quarter of her 200 pine trees will qualify as legacy trees and be left intact.

She said a decade ago, when the EPA discussed how the site would be restored, no talk of removing their trees ever surfaced.

“If I had known that, I would have not walked out of here — I would have run,” Susan said.