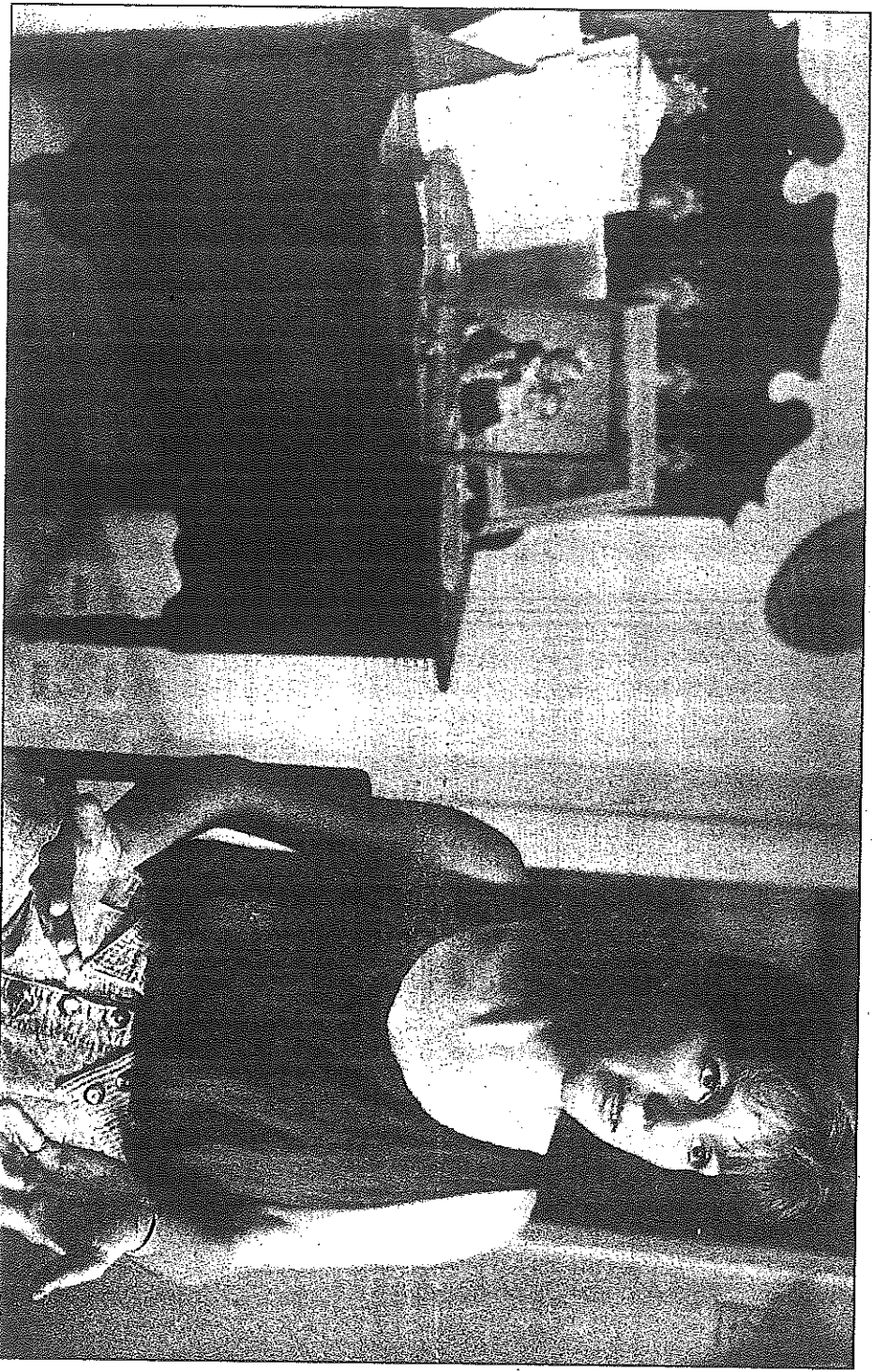


Unacceptable toxic risk



Eugene Louie — Extra

Ruthanne Fray has become a spokesperson for a Sunnyvale neighborhood group concerned about toxics

Sunnyvale residents fear underground plumes

By Leland Joachim
Mercury News Staff Writer

The certainty that groundwater under parts of their neighborhoods is spiked with lethal chemicals has galvanized north Sunnyvale residents.

The fuel, solvents and other dangerous substances leaked for years from nearby factories before regulators in 1981 ordered the industries to investigate.

Cleanup started soon after that, but a series of public meetings this sum-

It scared me to think there were possible cancer risks. ¶

— Ruthanne Fray

mer to air further cleanup plans con-

pled with intensive organizing by the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, has brought out residents' groups demand-

industries and the federal and state agencies as concerned partners.

In two of the three areas where "plumes" of contaminated water spread far from their sources, resi-

dents have organized homeowners groups to challenge the industries and government agencies responsible for cleaning up the chemicals.

In the third area, surrounding and reaching north from National Semiconductor Corp. at Kifer Road and Lawrence Expressway in Santa Clara, not all public meetings have been scheduled and the community has not yet organized. Although the National Semiconductor plant is in Santa Clara,

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Cover Story

Sunnyvale residents combat contamination

Risk called unacceptable

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become a spokesperson for the neighborhood group.

"It scared me to think there were possible cancer risks somewhere down the road. For me, but more so for my children."

Effecting home values?

Besides making sure the cleanup takes place as fast as possible and that regulators don't allow the industries to shift their responsibility, the residents in San Miguel and another group surrounding Westinghouse Corp. plant at Hendy and Fair Oaks avenues have leaked polychlorinated biphenyls and fuels, residents are planning to incorporate as a non-profit home-owners association.

Group at work

And in Sunnyvale's San Miguel neighborhood, north of where toxics from three computer-age industries at Stewart and DeGuline drives have entered the groundwaters, a loosely banded group is at work.

"I know this isn't Love Canal," said Rutianne Fry, who lives just outside the supposed borders of a plume stretching north across Bayshore Freeway from the Advanced Micro Devices, Signetics and TRW Corp. leaks.

But Fry, a nurse who has two small daughters, said, "We want there to be no health risk here."

Learning about the contamination and the possibility that vapors from the shallow groundwater might be seeping into homes "scared me," said Fry, who has all pulling together — was really

amount of talent in that room — power we had in that room and the "To realize the amount of brain recognize their own capabilities. The residents are beginning to Bradsshaw, one of the organizers. Mentations, according to Bonnie

government studies and recommendations, according to Bonnie

Addressing different issues

Bradsshaw said people who want independent tests of drinking water signed one list. Others who recognize that the chemicals can threaten workers as well as residents volunteered to work with Westinghouse unions. And other volunteers will contact the California Department of Health Services to make sure a planned study of the health of neighbors and employees is thorough and to offer people to help conduct surveys.

Bradsshaw said

It's possible the plumes have mingled to form one or two massive peacock's tails of underground contamination stretching across much of northeast Sunnyvale. That possibility is most likely where the plume from the industries at Stewart and DeGuline borders on the National Semiconductor plume.

Industries to the west of the National Semiconductor plume's known borders are being required to investigate their sites for leaks, and more plants may be included in the water quality board's study. If more leaks are found, then wells would have to be drilled to find out how far the pollution has spread in the ground water.

Meanwhile, the western edge of that irregularly shaped plume, which a map shows reaching northeast across Lawrence and Highway 101, is dotted with question marks between Arques and Duane avenues east of Commer-

exciting," said Bradsshaw.

"We're not absolutely sure where that line is," said Jim Thompson, a community relations officer for the board. "We may end there. We had house meetings, up naming additional companies (as polluters) and asking them to put in monitoring wells."

Typically, such wells are placed both on- and off-site, and are drilled ever further from the source until clean water is pumped. Then the industries begin pumping to extract the contaminated water inside the plume boundaries. The water is treated and dumped into storm drains.

Long cleanup period expected

The board's cleanup recommendations predict pumping and treatment could continue for 30 to 100 years before the cleanup can be deemed complete.

The water quality board is handling two of the cleanup efforts, and the federal Environmental Protection Agency is in charge of the third, at the Westinghouse site. The timing of the public meetings held by the regulatory agencies was perfect for the toxics coalition, which hired a program director, Debbie Silva, six months ago. She's been helping the neighborhood form organizations and deal with the agencies and industries.

"What we decided to do was make sure the people know the community meetings are being held," Silva said. Notices of meetings often are boring and hard to understand, she said.

"The toxics coalition went to the very first community meeting at AMD in May of this year, and about four people (residents) were there. We asked for, and got extensions. We had house meetings, and we went door-to-door," Silva said.

"We got about 200 people to a meeting at San Miguel School."

The coalition, whose director is Ted Smith, was started in 1981 when the first toxic leaks at IBM and Fairchild corporation plants in San Jose were discovered. The non-profit group, which includes representatives of labor, environmental and public interest organizations among its officers, concentrated on promulgating model ordinances to deal with toxic hazards and the public's right to know about them.

The coalition in 1984 conducted an organizational drive throughout the county. "We had learned of scores of leaks. It seemed things were totally out of control," Smith said.

When the coalition disseminates information, it often solicits funds in the area where a toxics problem exists. The coalition spends about \$300,000 a year, most of it coming from foundations, an annual film benefit and some government contracts, Smith said.

If the residents around Westinghouse sought a grant to hire technical help, the actual applicant might be the toxics coalition.

Toxic zones

These are the neighborhoods above groundwater supplies that have been contaminated by industry.

■ The area surrounding and reaching north from National Semiconductor Corp. at Kifer Road and Lawrence Expressway in Santa Clara.

■ The area stretching north from the Advanced Micro Devices, Signetics and TRW Corp. plants at Stewart and DeGuline drives in Sunnyvale.

■ The area reaching northeast from the Westinghouse Corp. plant at Hendy and Fair Oaks avenues.

Source: State and federal regulators

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which has obtained such grants in the past. Silva said the grant probably would be directed toward producing an alternative to the cleanup plan the EPA has proposed.

The coalition and the residents didn't care much for the plan, which called for leaving some PCBs in the ground at the plant.

A new column about life on the road in The Mercury News.