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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sense of hope for Greenway Trail

A recent editorial in the Tri-City Voice discussed the seminal book by Rachel Carson, Silent Spring. The 1962 book addresses the environmental effects of contaminants in our water supplies, housing, cookware, and other products. The issue of environmental contamination hits home right here in Fremont. Per Proposition 65, the city needs to address the potential of arsenic, lead and benzene contaminants along a 1.7-mile easement, the abandoned Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) line that runs right through the heart of Fremont.

It's part of the East Bay Greenway Trail, first proposed in 1974, which will run from Oakland through Hayward and onward to Milpitas. In Fremont a 1.7-mile segment of abandoned UPRR line runs from Alameda Creek near Vallejo Mill Elementary School to Central Park near Paseo Padre Pkwy. Plans from 2008–2009 (bit.ly/2Wovwx1 and bit.ly/2K6r7bv) estimated that the Greenway Trail would cost $17 million. The city council spent $300,000 for three feasibility studies which occurred in 2008, 2016 and 2018. The city negotiated a deal with UPRR in 2018, to purchase the easement for only $3 million. Compare that to the $230 million ACTC expects to spend to purchase 17 miles of easement between Oakland and South Hayward.

Earlier this year, city attorney Harvey Levine withdrew from the 2018 agreement, citing concerns about utility easements and the noise and dust from thousands of truckloads of soil to be removed. However, we understand that the real issue is contamination of the easement. The city has yet to notify residents alongside the easement of the specific risks, as required by state law (Proposition 65). The law requires that residents be warned of the presence of toxic substances like airborne lead, asbestos and benzene. The city and UPRR have made no provision for the cost of the cleanup.

The city ought to be forward-thinking and proactive. It should require environmental cleanup, and construct the long-planned north–south multi-use trail along the UPRR easement. The city claims 100,000 cubic yards (10,000 truckloads) could be removed from the Greenway Trail, equivalent to digging a trench six ft deep, 70 ft wide and 1.7 miles long. The excavation would serve no purpose, except to remove contaminants. The 2009 study called for removing only the top layer, or 10,000 cubic yards. According to the 2009 study, asphalt pavement (12-ft wide) would cap any potential contamination. The 2018 cleanup of the brickyard in Niles Canyon should serve as an example. It addressed petroleum distillates that were observed to be leaking into Alameda Creek. The oily sheen was a threat to the ACWD water supply and to Quarry Lakes.

The city and UPRR should proceed with the clean-up of the abandoned UPRR easement, to keep contaminants from leaching into our groundwater. Because of the potential environmental impact, the 1.7-mile cleanup needs a sense of urgency similar to the cleanup in Niles Canyon. At the same time, the UPRR cleanup should have a sense of hope—because of the benefits of multi-use paths for active transportation, pubic health and public safety.

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