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NEWS | FEATURE

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Redumpvelopment

City and residents clash over future of HB dumpsite

by Nick Schou

For residents of southeastern Huntington Beach, there are at least three things worse than living next to a hazardous-waste dump: living next to a gun range, a desalinization plant or a city bus yard.

The dump in question is Huntington Beach's Ascon-Nesi toxic-waste dump—several immense, fetid pools of low- and high-tech goo across the street from Edison High School, surrounded by a few warning signs and a chainlink fence. In July, the Orange County grand jury issued a report blasting the city for failing to clean up the dump, a goliath undertaking estimated to cost between \$20 million and \$30 million.



Photo by Johan Vogel

But during a Nov. 15 public hearing, city officials announced they were studying a new plan to clean up the dumpsite: redevelopment. By declaring Ascon-Nesi and the AES electrical

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power plant next door a redevelopment area, the city said it could use tax revenues (from both the power plant and whatever replaces Ascon-Nesi) to help pay for the cleanup.

At the meeting, the city's Economic Development Department told worried residents they are looking into whether to replace the dumpsite with a privately owned gun range, a desalinization plant, or a city-run storage yard and vehicle maintenance area.

Debbie Cook, an environmental attorney who last month won her race to become a city councilwoman, was at the meeting. "It was a full house," she recalled. "The city has hired consultants to oversee the whole process of getting public input, but from citizen comments, I wouldn't spend another dime on this issue. The community is not in favor of it."

"The plans are not very appealing to our neighborhood," confirmed John Scott, president of the Southeast Huntington Beach Neighborhood Association. "The feeling of a good deal of people around here is that we are a forgotten area of this city, and every time a toilet gets flushed, we bear the burden of it."

But it's no mystery why city officials are proposing to replace Ascon-Nesi with another industrial project. First of all, thanks to long-term safety concerns, turning Ascon-Nesi into open space or a park where children might romp on the toxic soil is unlikely. Any new project there would have to be approved by the California Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC), which is scheduled to release a "feasibility" study regarding various future uses of the dumpsite sometime next year.


In 1992, the city considered rezoning the land for an apartment complex. Under that plan, a developer would take over the land at a reduced cost, assume cleanup responsibilities and then make money on rental income. City officials say no such plan is now in the works, perhaps because that proposal was killed by Ascon-Nesi's neighbors, including Scott's Southeast Huntington Beach Neighborhood Association, who feared increasing traffic.

Given the city's latest proposals for Ascon-Nesi, new apartments might seem preferable to living next door to a bus depot or a desalinization plant. Yet a decade after neighborhood activists defeated the apartment-complex plan, the same anti-traffic sentiment holds sway in the community. Scott told the *Weekly* that many of his neighbors would rather have a dumpsite around the corner "than face the prospect of all that additional traffic and the impact on the schools" that would come with a new apartment complex. "Some say the dumpsite is an



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eyesore and has to be cleaned up," he explained. "We've always assumed that, but there is still a substantial voice that says they'd rather leave it as it is."

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