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## Huntington Beach Independent

HUNTINGTON BEACH

### Cleanup in sight

■ Five decades of accumulated toxic waste may be removed from the Ascon dump if oil and chemical companies come through with the funds

By Paul Clinton

A consortium of oil and chemical companies have breathed new hope into stalled efforts to clean up the Ascon toxic waste dump in Southeast Huntington Beach.

The nine biggest companies who dumped their waste on the property for five decades have pledged to participate in the cleanup of one of Southern California's most contaminated landfills.

Armed with a letter from the companies promising to review cleanup plans, a new developer hopes to nail down funds from them and build homes on one of the last stretches of undeveloped beachfront property in Huntington Beach. But city leaders of a town built by the black gold pumped from thousands of wells in the 1930s, 40s and 50s have taken a skeptical attitude, after watching a string of developers head into bankruptcy court.

"Hopefully, now with some responsible parties, we'll get it cleaned up," Councilwoman Grace Winchell said. "Unless there's some money coming in from these companies, we're probably going to go down the drain again."

Winchell sat on the council in 1992, when the NESI Investment Group secured approval from the city for the cleanup plan and a zoning change that would allow as many as 502 homes to built.

The site has always registered on City Hall's radar screen, but it took a step up the ladder last month when it was included in the city's redevelopment plans for the southeastern section of Huntington Beach.

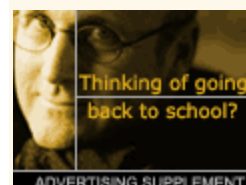
Since December, the state's Department of Toxic Substances Control has held several rounds of private talks with the nine oil companies that used the 38-acre parcel for more than five decades as the end point for their crude-oil waste, styrene and other chemicals.

The list is a who's who of multibillion-dollar industrial giants -- Atlantic Richfield Co., Chevron Texaco Corp., Conoco Inc., Dow Chemical Co.,

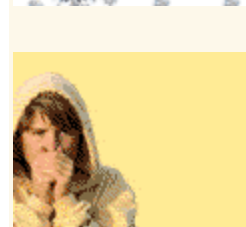
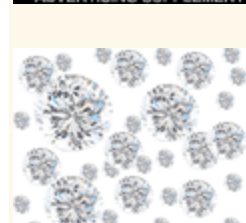
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Exxon Mobil Corp., Phillips Petroleum Co., Shell Transport & Trading, Southern California Edison and TRW Inc.

The companies have hired Project Navigator, a Fullerton environmental firm, to analyze soil and ground water contamination at Ascon, which is at the corner of Magnolia Street and Hamilton Avenue.

"The process is to review a variety of options to determine whether excavation and removal of the waste can be implemented successfully," Chevron Texaco spokesman Santana Gonzalez said. "Chevron Texaco expects the working group to work cooperatively to assure that any past activities of the company do not pose a risk to the community."

A trip onto the site shows just what a hodgepodge of junk and waste was shipped to Ascon between 1938 and 1984, when it was a functioning landfill.

Makeshift roads cut through the site, weaving around the five open lagoons of oily waste and saltwater "brines." Seven buried pits dot the site, along with a noxious styrene pit.

Between the time it opened and 1971, Ascon was used primarily as a dump for the drilling mud, fuel oil, chromic acid, sulfuric acid, aluminum slag and styrene (a form of plastic). After that time, solid materials -- like asphalt, concrete, soil and wood -- were dumped.

Many of these toxic chemicals appear on the state's Proposition 65 watch list of substances that cause cancer.

Environmental reports completed by a number of consultants and agencies also show ground-water contamination from the site. Benzene, petroleum hydrocarbons and crude oil have been found in the wells.

Even though the site has been extensively studied, more work needs to be done, state toxics spokeswoman Jeanne Garcia said.

"It's going to be an extensive cleanup," Garcia said. "We need to do additional investigation."

The agency's so-called "letter of agreement" gave the companies seven months to put together what is known as a remedial action plan, which lays out how the property will be cleaned.

That plan is expected to be in place in August.

Homeowners living near the site, which is across the street from Edison High School, also said the oil companies could be the catalyst that finally moves the cleanup forward.

"It certainly makes it possible because that option wasn't there before," resident George Mason said. "These are some deep pockets."

Mason sits on the board of the South Huntington Beach Neighborhood Assn.

The cleanup of the soil and waste at Ascon is estimated to cost \$31.5

million. Not enough information exists to put a price tag on the ground water pollution, Garcia said.

The high cost of the cleanup has been folly to at least three prior companies who announced grand plans for the land only to sink into the pit of bankruptcy. If clean, the land would be worth between \$1-million and \$1.75 million per acre.

"It's time to get it cleaned up," said Ted Broedlow, managing partner of Beach Coast Properties and co-owner of the contaminated property. "The land is too valuable."

Broedlow has optioned the property to Enfra LLC, a new developer. Enfra, in turn, hired consultant Kevin Canning to study Ascon.

The new group plans to lay out a more detailed plan for city officials this fall about the housing they plan to build, Canning said.

Enfra is the fourth company in nearly two decades bidding to develop the land.

Ascon Properties Inc. first bought the land from the Steverson Bros. in 1984. The company, whose name was a shortcut for "asphalt-concrete," gave up on the property in 1989 after steep cleanup costs, a wave of hefty fines from regulators and a lawsuit from the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

Picking up the property in foreclosure, NESI began a massive cleanup effort. The company began soil testing and cleanup, before it also fell into receivership.

NESI, however, successfully secured the City Council's approval to rezone the land for housing. It is twice as dense as the surrounding neighborhoods.

The company contended it needed the high number of units to pay for the cleanup.

Councilman Peter Green, who finished the first of his two eight-year terms in 1992, said he still hears criticism about that decision.

"There have been a lot of complaints about that," Green said. "The idea would be to zone it as a golf course, but the green fees would not cover the cost [of the cleanup]."

In 1993, Long Beach-based Signal Mortgage Co. took over the property, also in foreclosure, from NESI.

An agreement with California-Nevada Developments in 1995 also fizzled, when that company pulled the plug on a five-year testing effort on the site in July 2001.

However, the company successfully completed a remedial action plan with the state toxic substances agency for the soil the prior month.

City officials hungry to get the site cleaned up also hope to include the

Ascon dump in a redevelopment plan for southeast Huntington Beach.

Establishing redevelopment in the area could help bring in additional city money for improvement to the roads, sewers and other infrastructure.

"There's just a bigger tool kit available with redevelopment," said David Biggs, the city's economic development director. "Maybe we can expedite the cleanup. Maybe it'll happen in five years rather than 10."

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