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December 29, 2004, Wednesday
KR-ACC-NO: GB-WASTE-SUIT-20041229
LENGTH: 554 words
HEADLINE: Whittier, Calif.-area residents sue waste firm, calling
site a dirty shame
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BODY:

North Whittier and Avocado Heights residents are suing Athens Disposal Co., claiming the company's recycling facility on Valley Boulevard is a breeding ground for rats and roaches and a source of foul odors, air pollution and other problems.

The lawsuit was filed Dec. 20 in Pomona Court on behalf of 100 residents who live in unincorporated county neighborhoods near the waste facility. The suit also seeks to stop a proposed expansion that would allow Athens to take in several more tons of trash than it does now.

Marilyn Kamimura, a North Whittier resident, spearheaded the lawsuit. She said residents have complained for years about noise from trash trucks, health problems and foul odors that seep into their homes. Some residents are afraid to open their windows because they worry the air is unsafe to breathe, according to the suit.

"This facility is detrimental to human lives, and the people have finally banded together to say we can't take it anymore," Kamimura said.

Officials at Athens did not return several calls seeking comment on the lawsuit.

However, in the past, Duane McDonald, director of environmental services for Athens, has said the company has mitigated odors and noise as best as it can. It also has installed a \$ 100,000 misting system in the building to cut down on dust.

Ralph Rios, a Montebello attorney who represents the residents, said he will ask the court to halt operations at the facility. The plant, at 14048 Valley Blvd., receives trash, which is then sorted to separate recyclable materials.

"People have been complaining about the smell, rats, birds and

roaches since it opened in 1997," he said. "These residents shouldn't have to be exposed to this. They have a right to good quality of life."

But residents say the efforts have not made much difference. "The problem is, it's an open dump site. They may as well be dumping the trash on Valley Boulevard," said Wesley Ojala Jr., an Avocado Heights resident. "It should all be torn down or built correctly." Residents also are fighting to halt a planned expansion of the facility as part of their lawsuit.

Athens is seeking the county's permission to take in 8,500 tons of trash per day. It now accepts 1,920 tons per day.

The Los Angeles County Regional Planning Commission, which has held several public hearings on the matter, has tentatively scaled back the expansion proposal. The commission has tentatively approved allowing Athens to take in 4,000 tons per day for a year.

If county officials determine that Athens can safely handle that amount, the facility would be allowed to increase the intake load to 6,000 tons per day.

County Supervisor Gloria Molina, who has attended public hearings regarding the facility, has not yet taken a position on the proposed expansion. She is awaiting additional input from residents, her spokeswoman Roxane Marquez said.

Residents say their complaints to the county about conditions at the facility have been ignored.

"All the public hearings, presentations on the matter even a survey I did of residents in the area that showed they had a number of health problems haven't done any good," Kamimura said.

JOURNAL-CODE: GB

LOAD-DATE: December 30, 2004