

## Is Treasure Island toxic? Residents' worries grow

Marisa Lagos

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Treasure Island resident Kathryn Lundgren has been concerned for several years about the effects of contamination at the former Navy base on her family's health.

But when a group of Navy contractors dug a small radioactive fragment out of her front yard last month, Lundgren became angry and scared. The fragment, a metal disc the size of a dime, was detected during radiation scans conducted in November but wasn't dug up until the end of January. The Navy didn't give a reason for the delay.

During that time, Lundgren attended two meetings where city, state and federal officials repeatedly assured residents that the island is safe and that the scans were merely precautionary measures. It wasn't the first time radioactive fragments have been found near her home - another two were dug up last spring.

The disc found in January is just the latest in a string of radiological revelations by state and federal officials in charge of cleaning up the former military base, which will eventually be transferred to the city of San Francisco and redeveloped. The Navy believes the radiation is left over from the decontamination of radioactive ships and from dials, gauges and deck markers left behind from a time when the military used radioactive paint to make things glow in the dark.

Residents and others familiar with the contamination issues at Treasure Island say the discoveries - combined with other toxics known to pollute the island's soil since before residents were moved there in 1999 - raise questions about whether San Francisco should have moved people there in the first place, before the island was clean, and whether it should have allowed them to live there during the cleanup.

While government agencies have repeatedly determined that the radiation and other toxics don't pose a health risk, residents say they have not been kept up to date on the cleanup and don't trust the safety declarations.

Lundgren, who has repeatedly told city, state and federal officials she is concerned for her family's and neighbors' safety, said she is shocked that no one has contacted her or her neighbors to explain what was found last month.

She is ready to move.

"I have sat in meetings since they obviously knew it was there, and they looked me dead in the face and told me there was no way we would be around (radiation)," said Lundgren, who has lived on the island since 2006. "The place where they found that device, because it's by the kitchen window, I used to keep the window open and the kids would sit out there and do math and chalk and art. ... I am so angry. If I hadn't been home, who would have told me?"

### Find not 'significant'

Bob Beck, development manager for the Treasure Island Development Authority - the city agency overseeing the island - said he was informed of the Jan. 29 discovery six days later, but has no plans to inform residents in the area individually because the object was not deemed "significant" by the Navy. Beck said the city will talk about the object at the next meeting of the Restoration Advisory Board - a group made up of residents and government officials - on Tuesday. Both he and Navy officials said they regularly update the public at these meetings, which are often sparsely attended. Navy spokesman Lee Saunders also noted in a written statement that thousands of pages of cleanup records are available to the public on Treasure Island or at the San Francisco Main Library.

Beck said the Navy identified three "elevated" radiation readings during its recent round of scans, but all were low compared with some of the tests conducted earlier in 2013. He said the city doesn't want to scare people by telling them about every radiological discovery if it's not deemed a health risk by experts.

"The items detected and excavated were concluded not to be significant. Do we saturate the people with information about this stuff - 'We found something, but never mind?'" he asked.

Supervisor Jane Kim, whose district includes Treasure Island, said she believes the island is safe, but agrees that authorities have at times been "terrible" at communicating with residents. Kim said communication has improved over the past year. As an example of that progress, Kim cited two separate meetings, facilitated by professional mediators, last spring and in December.

"I think when you are the expert ... there is a level of insensitivity you have to the average layperson; and people's fears, especially when you have kids, are totally legitimate," she said. "I don't think their questions and concerns have always been addressed the way they want them to be."

In a city where the safety of fake grass playfields became a major source of debate and a city agency is in part dedicated to helping consumers steer away from toxic products, it's surprising that there's not more alarm on the part of city officials, Lundgren said. She and many residents say their families, and kids in particular, are suffering from health issues they cannot explain, and worry they will develop medical problems later in life.

All of Lundgren's children - ages 13, 16 and 17 - have developed chronic health conditions in recent years, she said, including lupus-like symptoms in her middle daughter, Praise. Her husband, Eric, went into heart failure in 2006, she said, after attempting to put down AstroTurf in their backyard to keep the dust from getting inside.

Lundgren said authorities keep assuring residents they are taking every precaution to ensure residents' safety, but do not come clean about new discoveries until they are forced to by observant residents or media reports.

"When do I get to use precaution for my family? When am I going to be informed enough so that I can be proactive for my kids?" she asked. "I just think they are not going to tell us the truth - they are absolutely going to stick to their story - and every time we catch them on something they are either deadly silent or want to evade the question entirely."

Lundgren hasn't always felt this way. For years, she, like many of her neighbors, felt blessed to have the opportunity to live in such a spot.

Treasure Island - with its sweeping views of the bay, Marin and San Francisco; its small-town feel; and its affordable three- and four-bedroom rental homes - is an anomaly in the Bay Area. When it became available, the city jumped at the opportunity to relocate people there.

Starting in 1999, under Mayor Willie Brown, the city began leasing about 1,000 housing units on the island and adjacent Yerba Buena Island to about 2,000 Bay Area residents - about one-third of them formerly homeless or otherwise low-income people who qualified for below-market-rate housing, and another third families with children. The plan was to house people in the existing buildings, then redevelop the land.

### **Lagging cleanup**

But Navy cleanup efforts have taken longer than anticipated, in part because of the unexpected discoveries of radiological materials, starting in 2007 and continuing into this year. State health officials have raised questions about whether there are other, unknown sources of contamination. Among the places where elevated radiation levels were discovered was the soil under a playground in the housing area. That playground remains open, because the state determined in 2012 that there was no exposure risk, said Saunders.

Last March, radioactive fragments and soil with elevated radiation levels were discovered in five separate places in the housing area - including the two fragments near Lundgren's home. Contact with one of the fragments, health officials wrote, could cause "radiation burns, hair loss and possible ulceration."

Radiation under the 93-acre housing is not the only potential health risk. Before residents moved in, the Navy and city knew that the land under the island's housing area, known as Site 12, was a former waste disposal site and that many of the half-century-old homes contain lead paint and asbestos. Not long after residents were moved there, the Navy also discovered that parts of the housing area had been used as a burn pit after the Golden Gate International Exposition, the 1939-40 world's fair for which the island was built.

### **Digging banned**

From the beginning, lease agreements have barred residents from digging in their yards or altering the landscaping because of the arsenic, pesticides, lead, PCBs and other chemicals on a long list of known toxic materials left over in the dirt from the Navy's trash pit under portions of the housing area. But some residents said that prohibition wasn't made clear to them, and public health experts say it's ridiculous to expect children not to play in the dirt. "You can tell people not to dig in the garden, but kids dig - they do a lot of hand-to-mouth activity," said Rachel Morello-Frosch, director of UC Berkeley's public health program.

Beck said the city believes it has been clear about those restrictions but wants to "start doing more" ongoing notifications on the issue. Lundgren, for example, is worried that her kids may have dug up something potentially dangerous when they were younger. Praise, her 16-year-old daughter, recently told her that she and her two siblings used to save items they found in the dirt near their house. The family has been searching their home to make sure they aren't still around.

Morello-Frosch also raised questions about having vulnerable people, such as children, living near cleanup work, since soil and dust can easily move around "and remediation activity itself could be leading to short-term exposure."

Over the years, the California Department of Public Health has also raised concerns about soil removal, saying the Navy has not always taken precautions to prevent the spread of contamination or to make sure the soil it's moving doesn't contain radiation. In 2011, one of the Navy's contractors was told it had violated radiation and contamination laws by failing to properly document transportation of radioactive materials off the island.

### **Concern about kids**

"Fencing it off doesn't keep soil from moving ... and to assume that residents adjacent to sites where soil is being remediated aren't being exposed isn't so clear. The question is how much," Morello-Frosch said. "To do that right next to where kids play and people are living is not a great idea."

Beck said the Navy has been extremely careful to monitor air quality during cleanup work and that the concerns raised by state health officials are evidence that the regulatory system is working as it should.

"One of the reasons the cleanup has taken as long as it should is before the Navy does anything they need to prepare very detailed work plans to address the measures they are taking to control dust," he said, adding that the city "does rely on parents and households" to make sure kids aren't playing in the dirt.

Not everyone has been reassured, however. The Boys and Girls Club of San Francisco had concerns about having kids near a cleanup site and in November decided to shutter its Treasure Island center until the work is over. Until its closure, the center was next to a fenced-off area plastered with contamination signs that for months was covered with piles of dirt topped with green dust-control spray. Nearby is another plot of deep pits filled with water. Across the way are a playground and several playfields that are packed on weekends; nearby are a church and day care center, which remain open.

Saul Bloom, whose nonprofit Arc Ecology conducts environmental research and helps communities deal with pollution, said he's become increasingly alarmed at the situation on the island. He sat on the committee that advised the city when it was considering moving people onto Treasure Island in the 1990s and said the island was thought to be far less contaminated at the time.

As the extent of contamination - radiological and otherwise - has become more evident, and the uses of Treasure Island increased, his concern has grown, he said. Now, thousands of people attend concerts and sporting and other events there every year, go to the wineries that have set up shop, and visit the yacht club and dozens of other businesses located on the island. He wouldn't let his kids play there, he said.

"It became clear to me that any reasonable person would begin to question the degree to which the property is safe, given the broad-based uses," Bloom said. "All restraint was lost in terms of how they are using the facility."

Saunders, the Navy spokesman, said the Navy "has been supportive of the city of San Francisco's request to continue its leasing program with the first priority of ensuring protection of human health and the environment."

Bloom said he's also concerned about the lack of any sort of watchdog agency, noting that the city has a vested interest in moving development of the property forward as quickly as possible - and protecting itself legally. Residents, particularly low-income families, have nowhere else to go, he said, and the city has refused to conduct any sort of health risk assessment on the residents, saying that the population isn't big enough.

### **Regulators' attitude**

Lenny Siegel of the Center for Public Environmental Oversight - which promotes public oversight of environmental cleanups - said it's not unusual for regulators to downplay potential health risks.

"The tendency among regulatory agencies is to assure people," said Siegel, who has not been involved in the Treasure Island cleanup. "A lot of regulators err on the side of too much reassurance ... and regulators fight over what needs to be cleaned up, but people have a right to make their own risk management decisions and need to be informed so they can make those decisions."

Siegel said he would think twice before living - or playing - somewhere with that type of soil contamination, because dust can blow anywhere.

"It sounds to me like they moved people out there too quickly. ... It probably has to do with the frustration of how long it takes to make a base OK for use," he said.

Beck, however, insisted that the city's first priority is the safety of the public.

"All the information we have ... is that it is safe to be here and to live here," he said. "Certainly we, the city, would not want to keep people in conditions we feel are unsafe. ... There's no upside to putting people at risk."

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