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Was that an explosion?

*By Emily Wilson-Half Moon Bay Review--
Photo by Mark Jordan*

La Honda's a pretty quiet place. But to Wendy McConachie, that just makes the occasional explosions that much louder.

"There may be an explosion once or twice a day," said McConachie, who has lived for 13 years in the Santa Cruz Mountains community along Highway 84.

"If I'm home, it often will cause me to jump out of my skin, and it causes my dog to totally freak out. And I know there are a lot of dogs in town that are going apoplectic over this."



The three caves for the Clos de la Tech winery, as seen from the La Honda Elementary School.

The periodic explosions are helping carve three caves into the rock of Langley Hill, near Skyline Boulevard - each cave 300 feet long and over 20 feet tall.

Eventually, builders expect to construct 1,400 square feet of living space.

All of this is for a project that one of the owners at one point reportedly called a "hobby."

The three caves will house the Clos de la Tech winery. It's owned in part by T. J. Rodgers, the president and CEO of Cypress Semiconductor.

Rodgers said, when he first planned the winery caves, that he had not expected that the builders would have to use dynamite.

"In the third cave, we hit solid basalt rock, which we didn't think we were going to hit," he said.

Rodgers said the rock is 10 times as hard as concrete - hence the dynamite.

"Basically, there's nothing I can do about it," he said.

But some members of Cuesta La Honda Guild, a homeowners group, say their concerns go beyond the earth-rattling booms. A total of 19,000 cubic



Question of the Week

Do you think you are getting your moneys worth from our cable TV on the Coastside?

Yes

No

I don't think so since they removed the music stations I don't have cable TV

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yards of earth is being removed for the caves, and that is bound to affect wildlife, they say, particularly nesting birds.

And then there is the matter of how the whole thing looks.

"In La Honda, we pride ourselves on the beauty of our surroundings and (now) you look up and there's this disgustingly ugly sight," McConachie said.

Rodgers says that when the construction is over and the equipment is gone, there will be a hill planted with grapes, and the caves will look as much as natural caves as he can manage.

"If somebody had a house halfway between La Honda and my vineyard, and had to pick which way to turn the living room, they'd pick my direction," he said.

But the biggest concern of many residents is more long-lasting than all that. They are worried about their water supply.

Included in future plans for the winery is a vineyard block that abuts Woodhams Creek, the source of the most of the community's water. Over 70 residents attended a Guild meeting about the winery last Wednesday night. And the number one concern of that group, according to Guild board member Toby McLeod, was not the noise or the environment or the winery itself - most people were anxious about water.

"There was a consensus that long-term protection of the water is the highest priority," McLeod said. "The noise and the disturbance of the blasting will pass."

Rodgers, who has met with some of the residents to talk about their concerns, said that he is just as concerned as they are about erosion that the grapevines could cause. He has spent over half a million dollars on erosion control, Rodgers said.

"Erosion is a disaster to a farmer," he said. "If you lose too much topsoil, the land is worthless."

Rodgers said he is committed to using sustainable agricultural methods and hasn't had problems with erosion on the side of the hill he has planted.

"What I am trying to do is get them to understand it is certainly not in my interests to create problems for other people," he said. "Once they understand that I hope their apprehensions will come down."

Feeding the community's distrust of the project, McLeod said, is that the winery and the blasts to create it came as something of a surprise to community.

"La Honda wasn't officially notified of development on our border," he said. "And that caused a certain amount of emotion in our community."

"There was no mention of dynamite, and the permits weren't based on an accurate assessment."

Miroo Brewer, a planner with San Mateo County, said it was a mistake that the Guild, adjacent landowners, were not notified of the public hearing on the winery.

"That was an error," she said. "We try our best to make sure mistakes don't happen, but we are all human, and mistakes do happen, but there is no retroactive going back to the commission."

Brewer said the county gave the grading permit, but permits to use explosives came from the Sheriff's Department and the state Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Cal-OSHA).

Brewer added that her department has asked for a report to see if there are alternatives to blasting. She expects information by the end of the month. County officials don't have any say about whether people can use explosives or not, Brewer said.

"The county doesn't have anything that says you can't use explosives, but you are restricted on the noise level," she said.

"The community picked a place in La Honda and we did indoor and outdoor readings and both were below what is allowed."

But Janet Clark, a spokesperson for the La Honda Watershed Council, said that, even if the blasts do not go over the allowed limit, the community is still shaken by what could happen to the area and what she calls the "Sonoma-ization of San Mateo County."

"There is a fairly delicate ecological balance here. Water supply is limited, and the hillsides are unstable," she said.

Rodgers has been growing densely planted pinot noir grapes since 1994, and has been making wine from an experimental vineyard around his house in Woodside since 1996. Now it is time, he says, to "show the world what I've got."

"I will unembarrassedly say that my wine is great - and it ought to be for the amount of work I put into it," Rodgers said.

Rodgers said that his winery is the only one of its kind: It uses gravity to move grapes and wine, instead of heavy equipment, such as the pumps and conveyor belts used by many commercial wineries. It's an ancient practice, Rodgers said.

"If you were a grape," he said, "you would not know that it wasn't 1550 A.D."

A recent meeting between Rodgers, Clark and McLeod eased tension a bit, said Clark.

"We're all very hopeful we'll be able to work things out with him," she said.

"Out here, it's a bunch of very independent ranch-type folks. Who speaks for this area? Who advocates for us? We need to make the rest of the county aware that the area they come to for recreation may go away."

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