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City planners make a slick zone change to allow easier building on troubled land

By [Michael Collins](#) Thursday, Mar 5 2009

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West Hills resident Bonnie Klea is vivacious and no-nonsense. She won a battle over a rare bladder cancer diagnosed in 1995, and has long suspected the toxins that taint a big piece of land near her home — land on which, if Los Angeles planners get their way, more building will soon be allowed.

"I had surgery and was in the hospital nine times in nine months," Klea says. Of the cancer itself, Klea says, "It's in the neighborhood. On my little street alone, I have two neighbors who have had bladder cancer." Sixteen cancers have afflicted residents in 15 homes on Klea's block. A 1990 state health department survey of cancer records showed elevated levels of bladder cancer in west San Fernando Valley census tracts, including tract 1132, where Klea lives.

Klea is in a fight that she began 14 years ago, battling Los Angeles city planners and state Department of Toxic Substances Control bureaucrats over a proposed development at "Corporate Pointe at West Hills" in Canoga Park, where a well-known West Valley landmark, the former DeVry University, stands.

The expanse of land is riddled with heavy metal, chemical and radiological contamination. Despite her success in getting regulators to pay attention to these problems, Klea lost a crucial round with City Hall last week, in what she and her neighbors say is a decision that threatens public safety.



Frederick Noland

City planners, backed by state bureaucrats, rezoned Corporate Pointe from "agricultural" use to "limited manufacturing" use — which, in the arcane rules of zoning, means that City Hall agreed to allow dramatically lower controls over toxins in the soil, groundwater and air.

On February 26, city officials at a public hearing in Van Nuys also agreed not to require an Environmental Impact Report. Klea says their decision guarantees that chemical, radiological and heavy metal contamination will keep flowing into nearby Chatsworth Creek and beyond, into the Los Angeles River, and she warns of dust clouds that could be made airborne during construction.


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City planners say they are just following the State of California guidelines in determining what studies are needed. City planners wrote, in a 140-page report, that "there is no substantial evidence that the proposed project will have a significant effect on the environment."

"The statement that the site is contaminated with a wide variety of toxins is wholly unsupported and inaccurate as evidenced by the fact that there were less than six opponents of that project at the [planning] hearing," says Brad Cox, managing director of the L.A. office of developer Trammell Crow. "There has never been an environmental expert that has substantiated the claims of that small group of opponents."

Corporate Pointe sits on 51 acres of an 81-acre former aerospace and nuclear-research facility once occupied by Hughes Missile Group, Rocketdyne, Atomics International and Raytheon Missile Systems. The sprawling site at the corner of Fallbrook Avenue and Roscoe Boulevard was sold for \$35 million by DeVry University, which will be gutted and remodeled.

The land's owner, Multi-Employer Property Trust, under Trammell Crow Co.'s management, wants to erect two office towers.

Klea discovered in 1995 that aerospace and nuclear-research activity had left a galaxy of goo on the land and in the groundwater, just two blocks from her home on Ponce Avenue in Canoga Park. "I did an FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] request to EPA and received thousands of pages of data on the old Hughes property, and I was shocked to see widespread chemical and radiological contamination in the soil and groundwater," Klea told *L.A. Weekly*.

"We have radiation in all the wells in Hidden Lake and on the rest of the Corporate Pointe property," Klea alleges.

The state warns in its own January 30, 2008, report obtained by the *Weekly* that arsenic has impacted the sewer line "sitewide," and the storm-sewer system has not been investigated. "Key points where runoff could carry contaminants and where leaks are more likely to occur may need to be tested," it concedes.

Yet city planning officials, with the backing of state bureaucrats, have in essence watered down the safety standards at Corporate Pointe by formally reducing "soil standards" for deadly trichloroethene found in the property's soil and groundwater.

Under the city's plan, soil standards for that toxin have been slashed fivefold. And the chemical, which has been gradually cleaned from the site's groundwater since 1996, can leak from the dirt as a vapor. Scientists say that breathing even small amounts may cause dizziness, lung irritation, headaches, difficulty concentrating and poor coordination.

Gases from soil beneath Corporate Pointe could intrude "into buildings," the state's own report reads — and that, along with the soil disturbance that will occur during construction, potentially sending up toxic-laden dust, is one of the things that has Klea worried.

California Department of Toxic Substances Control has no problem spelling out that real concerns do remain: "Chemicals that have been detected in the groundwater above or near levels established

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for the protection of public health (MCLs) can be considered critical constituents," says Rodney Collins, the state's project manager overseeing toxic-substance controls during Corporate Pointe's rebuilding, in an e-mail to the *Weekly*.

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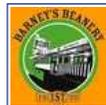
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