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Homeowners near Chiquita Canyon Landfill may get tax relief for odor costs

An EPA-led community meeting is set for 6 to 8 pm on Thursday at Castaic Middle School

Chiquita Canyon Landfill in Castaic on Wednesday, October 18, 2023. (Photo by Dean Musgrove, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

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For thousands of homeowners who are trying to protect their families from strong odors of decaying garbage and eye-stinging chemicals from the Chiquita Canyon Landfill in Castaic, their problems are costing money, and a new county program was announced Tuesday that may provide some financial relief.

Los Angeles County is offering affected homeowners two ways to save some cash on their property tax bills, Fifth District Supervisor Kathryn Barger outlined during a board of supervisors meeting. Barger, whose district includes the Santa Clarita Valley, said several affected residents had reached out to her about property taxes.

First, those late on paying their tax bills can apply for a waiver for all late fees, explained Keith Knox, the county's treasurer and tax collector. They can go to the Treasurer Tax-Collector's website and click on the box "Request a Penalty Cancellation."

If approved, all late fees and penalties will be eliminated. However, this is not a blanket program. Instead, each request has to be examined one-by-one. "I have dedicated a team of personnel to review those requests and work with residents based on their needs," Knox said.

After breathing strong odors during the past year, residents from Val Verde, Castaic, Live Oak and Hasley Canyon — areas near the 639-acre landfill in the Santa Clarita Valley — reported asthma attacks, bloody noses, skin irritations, nausea and heart palpitations to authorities including the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

Many stay in their homes and can't go outside or use their patios or backyards. Last summer, homeowners reported running air conditioning 24/7, spiking electricity bills. Some have paid for home hardening, such as weather proofing to keep odors out. Barger said they deserve relief from these costs, and she also is concerned about dropping property values.

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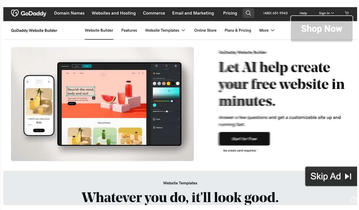

"I'm focused on helping homeowners who are worried about a possible decline in home values and who may not be able to pay their property taxes on time due to skyrocketing utility bills and other odor mitigation related expenses," she said.

Homeowners who believe their property value has declined can apply to the county assessor's office for a "Decline-in-Value (DIV)" review, Barger announced. Steven Hernandez, assistant assessor, said the staff is looking at home sales and market data in areas near the landfill, but so far they are not seeing evidence of a change in the market.

"We will continue to analyze sales data as it presents itself for decline in values," he said. To find out more information visit the assessor's website.

Some who live in the affected areas and are following the developments said these tax remedies will not help homeowners.

"Waiving a penalty on a property tax bill is 100 bucks and it is not that big of a deal," said Lynne Plambeck, founder and president of the nonprofit Santa Clarita Organization for Planning and the Environment (SCOPE) on Wednesday.

Lloyd Carder lives in Hasley Canyon where odors are not as frequent as for those closer to the landfill in Val Verde, a community of 5,000. He said people pay their property taxes along with their mortgage payments and usually don't have a problem with late payments. "These aren't delinquent people," he said.

As to downgrading the assessed value of one's property, he said there could be other ramifications, such as what could happen if they try to sell. Plambeck also said most homeowners don't want to see their home values drop.

A truck dumps garbage atop the Chiquita Canyon Landfill in Castaic. (Photo courtesy of Los Angeles County Public Works).

Instead, residents who live near the landfill are looking for solutions to stop the odors. A high-temperature chemical reaction beneath an older part of the landfill causes the odors and leachate releases. Leachate is a liquid produced by decomposing trash. But the higher temperatures have overwhelmed some of the mechanisms in the landfill, allowing leachate to escape down the sides of the landfill.

On Thursday, March 21, from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m., the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will hold a community meeting at Castaic Middle School, according to Julia Giarmoleo, press officer for the agency.

The purpose of the meeting is to let residents hear from state and federal agencies working on the landfill problem. The agencies will talk about what actions they've taken and what else they can do to address odor impacts, she said.

In February, the EPA issued an order indicating that the agency found there "may be an imminent and substantial endangerment to the public health or the environment."

On March 12, Assembly members Pilar Schiavo, D-Santa Clarita, and Eduardo Garcia, D-Coachella, who chairs the Assembly's Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials Committee, have asked Gov. Gavin Newsom to declare a state of emergency in Los Angeles County due to the "ongoing health and safety crisis for the communities surrounding the Chiquita Canyon Landfill."

Having a state of emergency may freeze property tax payments, or perhaps offer homeowners who want to sell and move more substantial help, said Abigail DeSesa, who lives in Val Verde and has said the smells are so strong that they sting her eyes, nose and throat.

She advocates for federal government assistance like the help given to communities after a natural or manmade disaster. "That way they can bring in government-backed, low interest loans so people can afford a place to move to," she said.

She said some people have simply abandoned their homes and gone to live with relatives in other areas. She will go to the EPA-led community meeting: "I am hesitant to get my hopes up," she said.

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