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Development begins at former Tacoma Superfund site

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By TONYA MOSLEY / KING 5 News



Construction begins on housing development at old Asarco copper smelter in Tacoma

TACOMA, Wash. - What once was an environmental mess is now slated to become a destination hot spot for Tacoma.

A local developer is in the midst of building a massive housing and retail center at the old Asarco copper smelter site in Ruston. Construction now is in full swing for the massive project at the former superfund site.

Look beyond this construction crew and you'll see one of most beautiful views in all of Western Washington. But underneath all of the beauty lies a controversial past.

For nearly 100 years the 67-acre parcel of land was home to the Asarco copper smelter. It's responsible for spewing high levels of arsenic, lead and other pollutants, making it one of the most polluted sites in the nation.

"Much of that is encapsulated on the site under a containment field that's capped," said Karie Hayashi, City of Tacoma spokesperson.



KING

Local developer MC Construction is in the midst of building a massive housing and retail center at the old Asarco copper smelter site in Ruston.

Purchased by Mike Cohen Construction in 1992, the land is now slated to become one of the largest development projects in Tacoma history, with 800 green condos, 35 custom homes, retailers, offices, a park and restaurants.

"It's like another piece of the puzzle that would actually be put into place that would connect the public amenities in Point Defiance Park with Ruston Way," said Hayashi.

Asarco has cleaned up 75 percent of the site. Cohen has complied with the strict rules of the Environmental Protection Agency, promising to clean up the remaining pollutants on the site. But there are still fears whether the site will be cleaned up completely.

"There probably are still fears, but not for us," said Mike Cohen. "We're confident that the plans that have gotten into what it takes to make this a residential site are adequate. Monitoring is required forever and the EPA is keeping close tabs."

"This provides a unique opportunity to one of the last great pieces of waterfront in our area," adds Cohen.

The City of Tacoma and Ruston is also gathering public input. Right now, the reviews are mixed.

"I certainly wouldn't want to have my kids down there. On every block in Tacoma there are at least a few for sale signs and now they're

building condos on speculation," said Stephen Shuman, Tacoma resident.

"I see it as an advantage to the city because they're going to connect all this across that site into Point Defiance Park where I jog for many years," said Mark Roland, Tacoma resident.

While construction is under way, the cleanup and approval process could take up to 10 years.

Last Friday, Cohen got the OK from the EPA to continue construction on the first phase of the project called Stack Hill, a group of single family homes just south of the old Asarco site.