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A Moving Experience : Settling Ground, Damage Send Apartment Dwellers Packing

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DANA POINT — It was 9 a.m. on Tuesday when the long, white moving vans pulled up. Four families are leaving their homes today, and Thursday, another four families will follow until their Dana Point apartment building, with a million-dollar view of the lush valley below, stands empty.

Just a few feet away, the reason for the evacuation is obvious. A huge fissure rends one already-empty apartment building from top to bottom. The slow-moving hillside has tossed the three-story structure like a toy, twisting staircases and ripping apart huge chunks of earth.

Now the devastation is creeping toward another occupied apartment building in the 450-unit complex known as the Bluffs, at Crown Valley Parkway and Camino del Avion, forcing the evacuation of 32 families. City officials say the undamaged structure isn't in immediate danger, but the developer is moving people out as a precaution.

"There used to be a tree here," said nine-month resident Andrea Steed, pointing to a four-foot deep crevice that starts a few feet from her bedroom window and winds its way down the hill. "I woke up one morning and the tree was just laying on the ground. They told us that we have until July 1 (to move), but there's no way we were going to wait that long."

Another 32 occupants were evacuated last summer from the damaged building nearby when William Lyon Co. officials first noticed that the ground was unstable. But the earth slippage accelerated greatly a few weeks ago, causing huge cracks to appear seemingly overnight in the now-empty structure and the ground.

The unstable hillside extends about 30 feet below to the Salt Creek bike trail, which is crisscrossed with large cracks near the affected area. County officials have temporarily closed the popular bike route that leads to Salt Creek Beach.

"We tried to cover the cracks with cement, but we were fighting a losing battle," said Larry Paul, coastal facilities manager for the county. "We couldn't keep up with it."

Although the destruction next door is clear, city officials maintain that there is no damage and no immediate threat to the building now being evacuated. But Lyon Co. officials decided to pay to move the residents, figuring "better safe than sorry," company Vice President Rick Sherman said. Residents are being moved to other units in the complex or have made other arrangements.

For the past week, Hank Camisaca has watched the trucks roll by his front door and seen his neighbors disappear, one by one.

"It was amazing how fast this all developed," he said. "Nobody was ready for it. These stood here for a year, and nothing really looked wrong with them. Then all of a sudden it started falling apart."

Most residents interviewed Tuesday were happy that the Lyon Co. was paying for their move, although Steed said she wished she had been told about the geological problems before she rented her apartment.

"When we were being shown the place, (the rental agent) told us that the building next door was being remodeled," she said.

The apartments line the top of a ridge overlooking the pricey Links at Monarch Beach golf course. Although many homes on the surrounding hillsides top \$1 million, rental units at The Bluffs start at a relatively inexpensive \$725 per month for a one-bedroom apartment.

Why the ground slipped under the apartments is still unclear, say representatives of the William Lyon Co.

"We think it is a subsidence (settling) problem," said Sherman, the Lyon Co. executive vice president. "We're not sure what the cause is. We're investigating it."

Dana Point building officials say they are waiting for a geological report from the Lyon Co. before drawing any conclusions about the reasons behind the slope's instability.

The building currently being evacuated will eventually be shored up, then reopened, he said. The apartments where the problem first surfaced will be torn down.

Whether the slope needs to be reconstructed is uncertain, Sherman said. If so, it would add considerably to a repair bill that "will definitely run millions and millions of dollars," the Lyon Co. official said.

Rebuilding the hillside would also keep the Salt Creek trail closed indefinitely. If that occurs, the county will consider seeking monetary compensation from the developer, said Robert G. Fisher, director of the county Harbors, Beaches and Parks Department.

Even demolishing the building has not proven to be easy. The abandoned structures have become homes to dozens of nesting cliff swallows. Because the migratory birds are federally protected, the developer was forced to get a permit allowing the firm to move the nests.

Since the apartment building was abandoned, the birds have moved in. Hundreds of swallows swarm the doomed building, swooping in circles above the structure throughout the day.

"It's like we live in a Hitchcock movie," said Talya Moore, who lives next to the empty apartment.

As residents were moving their possessions on Tuesday, a contractor was climbing a 50-foot ladder and carefully removing baby swallows and eggs from their nests.

Some 20 swallows and six eggs were brought to an Orange biologist who cares for stray birds.

"Quite a few of them are ready to fly on their own," said Susan Doggett, "It's getting pretty wild here."