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Mold complaints mount in Parkland

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HIGHLIGHT: Homeowners concerned about mold listen to Dennis Mele, a representative for builders WCI Communities Inc., CalAtlantic Homes and **Toll Brothers**, at a town hall meeting. Homeowner Christine Sheridan says she and her son have been sick because of mold in their Parkland home. Carline Jean/Staff photographer Carline Jean/Staff photographer

Christine Sheridan cringes every time she drives by a new home under construction in Parkland.

The building is a bitter reminder of her battle against mold that she said infested her \$1 million home in the Osprey Lake subdivision of Heron Bay.

The 44-year-old mother said she and her husband spent \$150,000 to live in a rental home for five months and hire experts to remediate the mold, which still is not entirely gone. She said the builder, WCI Communities Inc., reimbursed her only about \$6,800 and continues to dodge and downplay the problem.

"It's just not right," Sheridan said. "No homeowner should have to deal with this." Sheridan was one of nearly 100 people who packed Parkland City Hall last Wednesday evening to demand answers and plead for help in ridding their homes of mold.

The city arranged the forum to give WCI, **Toll Brothers** and CalAtlantic Homes the chance to explain what they're doing to address the issue.

But residents blasted the builders, asserting they aren't serious about solving a problem that was created by construction and design defects.

Mayor Christine Hunschofsky was unimpressed, scolding the builders' representative, attorney Dennis Mele, for not providing more detailed information after having a month to prepare for the meeting.

Hunschofsky opened the forum by saying the city had no legal authority over the

builders, aside from making sure the homes were built to code.

But after listening to worries of sick children and lower property values, the mayor asked city officials to investigate whether the city can take a more active role in helping residents.

"This is extremely important to us as your representatives," she told the crowd.

Moisture allows mold, a fungus, to grow, and it can lead to coughing, sore throats and more serious health conditions, experts say.

It's unclear how many homes are affected or whether other builders in the community have the problem.

Parkland is the last area of Broward County with enough land to accommodate large-scale home construction. The residents say the mold is in homes built within the past few years.

Government officials said they don't yet understand why it appears to be so concentrated in Parkland.

"There was no way of predicting this," Vice Mayor Stacy Kagan said.

In a brief presentation Wednesday, Mele said mold is common in any humid climate. He said a change to Florida's building code requires that attics be cooler than they were in the past.

Still, Mele said the builders are working diligently to identify and remove the mold, hiring third-party engineers and independent companies.

"All of [the builders] are doing the best job they can in communicating with each individual homeowner," he said.

In an email Friday, Mele said he was unavailable for further comment.

Residents complained that the builders are tight-lipped and defensive. One resident said it was a "disgrace" that officials from WCI, Toll and CalAtlantic sent Mele in their place to face the crowd.

Some residents said the builders blamed them for the mold because they set their thermostats at lower than 75 degrees.

"The underlying problem is not being fixed," said Scott Kilgore, owner of a **Toll Brothers** home in Parkland Golf & Country Club. "They think it's my fault."

Kilgore drew applause from the crowd as he told city commissioners that WCI, Toll and CalAtlantic should not be allowed to continue building homes in the city until the problem is resolved.

Kagan says she would support a measure to halt the construction, but she doesn't believe the city has the authority.

At the forum, Mele said Toll estimates that about 25 Parkland homes have mold, but he didn't provide figures from WCI and CalAtlantic.

The three builders have applied to the city for a combined 114 permits for fixes that they hope will eliminate the mold, city spokesman Todd DeAngelis said.

WCI is installing dehumidifiers, while CalAtlantic and Toll are using spray foam insulation.

CalAtlantic applied for 57 permits, WCI 47 and **Toll Brothers** 10, though some of those permits may be meant to prevent mold in homes that don't have it,

DeAngelis said.

Residents say they think the problem is more widespread than the builders are letting on.

"Two and two is not equaling four in our world," Osprey Lake resident Keith Hollis said.

Mark Moran said he moved last summer into a rented WCI-built house in Heron Bay and later noticed water dripping from his son's closet.

Moran and his wife, Jeanie, began to suspect mold when their daughters started getting unexplained swollen glands and hives. They said they recently paid for a home inspection, which attributed the mold to unsealed vents and light fixtures during construction.

Moran, a pediatric orthopedic surgeon, said the community of doctors, lawyers and other professionals will continue to press for answers.

"They're drawing on their expertise to come together and not take the brush-off from these companies," Moran said. "It's not just going to go away."

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