

Dusty Moorpark College overflow parking lot draws complaints

By Michele Willer-Allred

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When Rob and Dawn Marlow moved into their home near Moorpark College in the late 1980s, there were cows grazing in the field behind them.

That changed in early 2000 when the 3 acres behind their home near Collins and University drives became an overflow parking site to accommodate the community college's record number of students.

The school took out the grass and the brush that grew there, painting white parking lines. When heavy winds would blow, dust would be kicked up, ending up in backyards.

"We used to have to drain the pool and shovel the dirt out. We would spend days shoveling the mud out of the pool," Rob Marlow said.

It was then that the couple first contacted the school about the dust and other problems created by the lot. Car alarms regularly went off, and students blasted radios from their cars and trashed the parking lot, Marlow said.

In 2004, Dawn Marlow, 55, became ill with respiratory problems that doctors first thought was lung cancer. The nonsmoker was diagnosed with coccidioidomycosis, or valley fever, a potentially fatal fungal disease caused by airborne spores swept into the air by disruption of soil.

She said another neighbor was diagnosed with the same illness.

"That's when I really got irate," she said.

In response, school officials applied a surface solution to the lot to keep the dust down.

Iris Ingram, vice president of business services at the college, said the school has the air tested yearly to make sure it's safe and has tried to help clean up the dust.

But Rob Marlow said the surface solution only made the problem worse.

"Now you have this oily dirt flying around everywhere that sticks to everything," he said.

The college leases the overflow parking site from Messenger Investment Co. in Irvine. The lot is not used during the summer, and in the past, it was used only the first couple of weeks of the school semester when classes are the most full.

The Marlows said that unlike in the past, the lot is still full of cars well into the fall semester. The heavy winds have kicked up the dust, and students sometimes make the situation worse by driving in circles, or doing "doughnuts," with their cars.

Dawn Marlow said she gets pneumonia about three times a year. On some days, she needs to use inhalers. Her granddaughter is 15 months old and visits the house.

"When the winds kick up, I'm afraid to let her go out in the backyard," she said.

The Marlows said they think there has been a lack of response to their complaints by school officials. Their daughter, Jennifer, has started a petition at www.change.org to help get the message across that something needs to be done. About 40 people have signed so far.

Ingram said the school has spent "well over six figures" to help fix the problem. She said the school has applied the surface solution every three years, which is "as good as paving," but rain and wind have created problems nevertheless.

She said paving the lot "would be an enormously expensive process" that the college simply can't afford with its current \$11 million budget shortfall.

She said the school needs the additional parking, and the lot is the only place available.

Ingram said a new parking structure is in the works, to be funded with state bond money. The structure still needs state approval but could be built in two or three years.

Once the structure is built, the overflow lot won't be used, Ingram said.

Rob Marlow said he fears a parking structure would only be a temporary solution if enrollment continues to grow.

"They need to do it properly now," he said. "Concrete the whole thing and have a security officer."



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