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Study brings bad news

by VICKI HYATT

Editor

An engineering study of a mountainside where home foundations are cracking — a six-unit condominium complex called Hunters Crossing — provided homeowners with no good news.

The slide area, according to a study by Alpha Environmental Sciences Inc., in Waynesville, stretches about 250 feet parallel to Lickstone Road and extends about 300 feet up the hill from the east side of the road. On-site visits showed a number of cracks and vertical cuts in the ground, some of which are near the homes at the top of the failure area, the report stated.

Foundation cracks and wall displacements were found in homes at the top and bottom of the failure zone. New signs of distress continue.

Two 50-foot borings at the top of the failure area never reached rock, though a boring at the slope's bottom hit rock at 8.5 feet.

"Any event that could momentarily reduce the internal soil strength could cause a rotational failure to occur," the report stated. "The type of events that cause this condition would be the infusion of large amounts of water, either from periods of intense rain or a water line failure. Also, a seismic shock such as the 3.8 magnitude earthquake that occurred on Aug. 25, 2005, two miles southwest of Hot Springs could have caused this change in strength."

The strength reduction can be permanent or take an extremely long time to return to a balanced point, the report stated.

One treatment would require the removal of homes near Lickstone Road and then constructing a 70-foot berm extending 20 to 30 feet high. If the berm option was chosen, reconstructing home on the slope would not be feasible, the report said.

To attempt to stabilize the slope, anchor tie backs could be drilled into the soil or rock beyond the failure zone. The remedy could cost at least \$1 million, the report stated, but it might not work.

The report recommended the homes affected by the slope failure, if they are in a condition to be moved, be relocated.

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Greg Shuping, the emergency service director for Haywood County, became involved in the Hunters Crossing issue in late November when the unstable mountain conditions prompted safety concerns for area residents, as well as any emergency services personnel who might be called upon to respond to a disaster.

"My role is to make sure citizens received expedited service and we did," he said. "We looked at it, called in experts and turned it over to them. That's the protocol we're using to give people the information they need." Shuping said this is the second situation he is aware of where an unstable slope threatened homes. Another occurred when a Maggie Valley area home collapsed, killing one of the homeowners and leaving the other without a spouse or a home.

Citizens need to be aware of changes in and around their home and seek professional advice if they feel they need to, Shuping said.

"If anyone has any questions, they should contact the local planning or erosion control office," he said. "They should be able to send someone out to give some advice."

Marc Pruett, the Haywood County erosion control officer, said while it is sad, it is probably the right recommendation to remove the homes in Hunters Crossing.

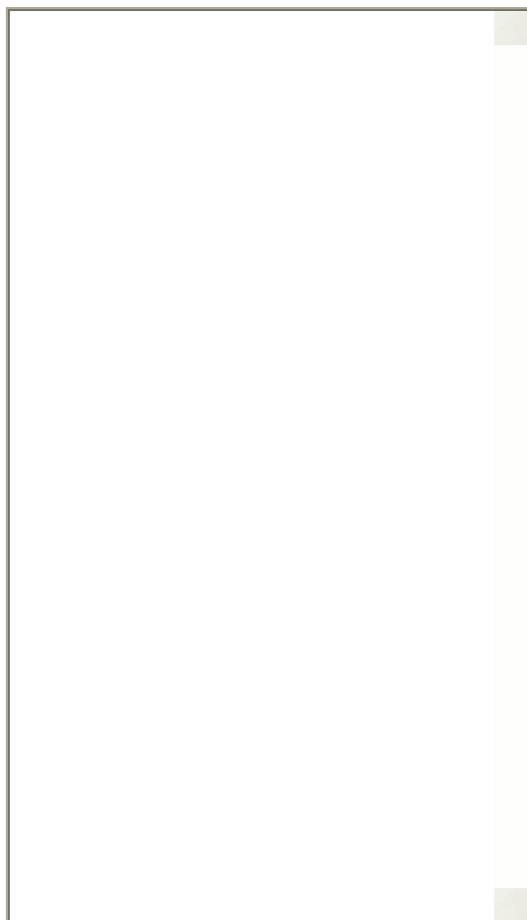
"I find that sad, but in some ways, expected," he said. "I feel like, again, there's a huge amount of development being done in areas where there's very little subsurface investigation of steep areas possibly with bad soils or bad geology. This is one that has shown itself to us after the fact."

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