

'Big Drop' project 2 years in the making

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ROCK SPRINGS - In mid-July 2007, contractors for the Wyoming Abandoned Mine Lands Division began work on a controversial subsidence project in the downtown area of Rock Springs known locally as the "Big Drop."

City officials had selected a 61-acre site called Tract H located along Blair Avenue and the city's Belt Loop for the planned \$2.4 million pilot project.

The project aimed to mitigate mine subsidence on the undeveloped tract of land, freeing it up for much-needed housing development.

The tract sits over what was known as the Excelsior/John Park coal mine that was first leased by the Union Pacific Coal Co. in 1911.

The project's key component was the use of a process known as dynamic compaction, a proven reclamation technique in other parts of the country, but largely untested in Wyoming.

Beginning July 17, 2007, huge cranes pounded the ground with 25-ton and 35-ton weights to collapse old, underground mine voids within a smaller portion of Tract H.

AML contractors dropped the weights 2,270 times over the span of about three weeks.

The state initially reported success in early results from the dynamic compaction, but a week into the project, residents of the "Tree Street" neighborhood near the project area began complaining to city officials about damage to their homes.

Some 20 or so homeowners in the area quickly banded together and formed a "Stop the Drop" group in an effort to halt the project.

Homeowners said the vibrations from the dropped weights were cracking walls in the neighborhood and doing other damage to ceilings, driveways, retaining walls, garages, fences, decks and foundations. Sinkholes opened up in some yards.

Responding to homeowner concerns, AML officials suspended the dynamic compaction portion of the project on Aug. 6, 2007.

At a contentious meeting in mid-August 2007 in city council chambers, Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality Director John Corra promised residents the agency would pay for all repairs to homes damaged by the dynamic compaction portion of the project.

Subsequently, 19 homeowners submitted damage claims to the state.

As part of the state's settlement process, the AML dispatched an engineering team in 2008 to inspect each of the 19 homes for which a homeowner filed a claim to assess the damage.

The homeowners received the state's settlement offer for estimated repair costs in December.

Most of the homeowners, however, rejected the offer, which they contended would not adequately compensate them for the needed repairs.

Tree Street residents turned to the Legislature, which passed a \$2.8 million budget amendment in February that aims to provide some relief for the beleaguered homeowners.

State AML officials agreed to use part of that money to redo the engineering inspections of the damaged homes, with an eye toward making new compensation offers to homeowners at a later date.