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Billionaire's mining
operation is blasting Collier
homes with no relief. It may
be about to get a whole lot
worse.

By Francisco Alvarado



(Facebook/Quality Enterprises USA)

On Sept. 14, 2023, in the outskirts of Naples, a chain of timed explosions tore through limestone rock on farm land owned by West Palm Beach billionaire Jeff Greene, rattling nearby homes in Golden Gates Estates to their core.

"The house shook like a pirate ship on rough open seas," recalled Robert Dixon, one of the homeowners affected. "I immediately went out to look at the walls, and I saw cracks."

Dixon complained about the damage to Quality Enterprises, the mining company that has a deal with Greene to excavate thousands of tons of limestone from the property at 16000 Immokalee Road where Greene ultimately plans to build a mammoth residential development on the nearly 2,800-acre property.

In response to the complaint, a real estate consultant working for Greene, Daniel Schrotenboer, confirmed in an email to Dixon the four-bedroom house was

damaged and promised an “independent” third-party evaluation.



Greene ultimately plans to turn the 2,800 acre mining tract into a huge housing development. (Credit: Jeff Greene campaign photo)

But that never happened. Instead a structural report was done by GeoSonics – the same company that provides data about the mine to Collier County government

officials. The firm dismissed the cracks in Dixon's five-year-old home as "normal wear and tear." The 52-year-old retired firefighter filed a complaint with county officials whom he says have not responded.

"It's absolutely disgusting that our elected county officials are ignoring the very same rules and regulations that they implemented to protect their constituents," Dixon said. "We go to county officials for help and they are in bed with the people that you need help fighting against. Nobody cares."

Dixon's plight is shared with other homeowners who complain the county hasn't listened to their complaints about the damage to their homes – and now the problem may be about to get a whole lot worse.

Quality Enterprises is seeking permission from the so-far compliant county to expand the radius of its blasting activity even closer to Golden Gate Estates, bringing it less than half a mile from neighboring homes. Dixon and a dozen other homeowners are mounting vehement opposition against the expansion, arguing the amount of blasting already allowed by Collier County is causing widespread damage to homes surrounding the mine.

"The mine company is petitioning to come within only 1,300 feet from our houses," Dixon told the *Trident*. "I cannot even imagine the damage and destruction we're going to deal with when we're already having problems and everybody's houses are cracking."

Dave Rudiera, one of Dixon's neighbors, said the blasting has been a source of homeowner frustrations since he bought his home in the early 2000s. "They had stopped blasting for a while, and then they started up again in 2020," Rudiera said. "Now they want to move into territory where blasting was totally off limits."

Neither Greene, his consultant Schrotenboer, or his land use attorney Richard Yonovich responded to requests for comment from the *Florida Trident*. But Barry Blankenship, a manager with Quality Enterprises, said his firm complies with all county and state regulations governing limestone blasting, and refuted the contention that mining explosions are cracking homes in Golden Gate Estates.

"Homeowners spew out things that are inaccurate," Blankenship said. "Anything I say will not change their minds. We have continually followed the plans, specifications and requirements by the county and the state."

The residents are left in a legal limbo in which they say their houses are being damaged with no accountability from the mines or the county.

Blasting rattles neighbors

Rudiera said he was among the first homeowners to experience the negative impacts of the blasting when he poured a concrete pad on his property in 2005, a year

after the mine opened. “It was not even in the ground for 10 days, and a blast cracked it right down the middle,” Rudiera said. “This became a big thing between me and the mining company.”

He said, now, two decades later, he and his neighbors are experiencing the same problems – and the same indifference from the company and county. “I never get a return call,” he said. “I never got anything, as if it never happened.”

Dixon and Rudiera claim that they were never clearly informed that blasting was allowed on the 2,800 acres. “I bought the land for my home like 20 years ago but didn’t start building the house until 2018,” Dixon said. “We officially moved in March of 2020 right around the Covid mess. Nobody—no realtors, no county officials—ever said, ‘Oh, hey, by the way, there’s a mine there.’”

After feeling several blasts in 2021, Dixon began seeking answers from Jack McKenna, the county’s development review manager. In email exchanges between 2021 and 2023, McKenna told the homeowner that seismic reports taken when the blasting occurred showed the explosions were “well within the [Collier County] code limits.” He added that any damage caused by the mine is a “civil issue” for the courts rather than the responsibility of the county.

The day of the Sept. 14, 2023 blast, Dixon emailed McKenna requesting that day’s seismic readings. “Today



Collier County official Jack McKenna says homeowners' complaints are for civil courts, not the county. (Credit: Collier County)

at 1 p.m. our house felt like it was going to crumble from the dynamite blast that took place," Dixon wrote. "There is no way this is an allowable approved limit. If it is then the allowable limit is way too high and needs to be minimized immediately."

In his reply a few minutes later telling Dixon he would send the readings to him shortly, McKenna carbon copied Quality Enterprises' Blankenship. Two days later, Blankenship emailed Dixon, McKenna and two other county officials to explain that the Sept. 14, 2023 blast was "within the normal range" of what the county code

allows based on a seismic monitor that was “halfway between your home & the blast area.”

McKenna chimed in 10 minutes later, backing up Blankenship’s conclusion. “I was just working on a response, but you beat me (and did a better job than I likely would have),” he wrote.

Both Collier County code and state law allow what’s called a maximum peak particle velocity of 0.5 inches per second in areas where blasting occurs. In some of his emails to Dixon, McKenna provided seismic readings to the homeowner that showed the blasts from the mine did not surpass the legal limit. McKenna also relayed that “national studies determined ... there is very minimal chance of damage” to structures even if blasting was done at four times the legal limit.

Is the county’s word its bond?

Left in a legal lurch, Dixon alleges county officials have ignored complaints that Quality Enterprises is not complying with other conditions set by the county such as having a surety bond in place that would pay damage claims made by homeowners.

Under Florida law, blasting companies are required to post a minimum \$100,000 bond for damage claims caused by the explosions. Collier separately requires Quality Enterprises to maintain a \$500,000 bond for

damage claims, according to the county's conditions for approval.

Dixon said the mining company refused to provide him with contact information for its surety bond company. The county meanwhile provided him with information for a Quality Enterprises' surety bond that is no longer valid.



Dixon, a retired firefighter, has spent the last two years fighting the county.
(Courtesy)

In June, when he tried to file a claim directly with the surety company that allegedly held the separate \$500,000 bond, the company informed Dixon it had no record of such a policy, an email shows.

In response to the *Trident*, McKenna admitted there was no bond, but provided a letter he'd received in August from Quality Enterprises President Howard Murrell stating that \$500,000 cash – rather than a bond – had been posted to cover blasting contingencies. Murrell acknowledged the funds would be used to settle any damage claims.

Though county records clearly show a bond is required, McKenna claimed Quality Enterprises was allowed to put aside the cash instead. "Our legal staff advised they just needed to have [the cash] set aside for potential damages," he said.

Now stonewalled, Dixon and his neighbors are pushing for changes to the Florida building code to address the impact of blasting on neighborhoods. "Florida homes are built to withstand high winds, not earthquakes," he said. "The Florida building code is not designed for the impacts of blasting."

The county, said Dixon, has a glaring conflict of interest in the seemingly never-ending dispute. According to Collier County records, Quality Enterprises is a county contractor that regularly wins infrastructure projects to build, expand and maintain roads, as well as other public utilities. Between July and October alone, Collier paid \$23 million to Quality Enterprises, disbursement records maintained by the county clerk show.

“The big problem here is that Collier County is one of the biggest customers of that mine,” Dixon said. “They need the aggregate to make the roads and infrastructure. Naples is growing like crazy. That is the only rock pit in Collier County that they’re blasting.”

Greene’s relationship with a key commissioner

The county position on the mine is tangled with long-standing personal connections and questions of conflict of interest. Collier County Commissioner William “Bill” McDaniel, whose District 5 includes the mine property, has an especially extensive history with the site.

McDaniel previously owned about 200 acres of the 2,800-acre tract through his company, Big Island Excavating, Inc. in the early 2010s. At that time McDaniel defaulted on two loans totalling \$42.7 million secured by the 200 acres. Then a Naples businessman named Gregory Jarrett bought the mortgages for \$900,000 and agreed to wipe out the debt in exchange for McDaniel not contesting the foreclosure so the property could be flipped to Greene.

Even prior to the sale of the 200 acres, McDaniel recommended Greene as a buyer for his land during the foreclosure negotiations and insisted his personal responsibility for the defaulted business loans be erased as part of the deal to quickly sell it to the billionaire.



Commissioner McDaniel helped steer 200 acres of the mining land to Greene.
(Credit: Collier County Commission)

McDaniel dismissed concerns from Golden Gate Estates homeowners that his complicated past with Greene puts them behind the eight ball. “I operated the mine many, many moons ago,” McDaniels told the *Trident*. “We don’t have any authority over the mine operation other than the hours it can operate and the conditional uses imposed way back when it opened up.”

In 2018, two years after buying the adjacent 2,600 acres for \$38.5 million, Greene – who made his fortune through real estate investments, primarily by shorting subprime mortgage-backed bonds – bought the 200 acres for \$1.5 million.

He said he met with Dixon and some of his neighbors in April of last year and “listened to their pleas,” but still has homework to do on the matter and hasn’t made a decision on whether to allow the blasting expansion. “I haven’t looked at the cracks,” said McDaniel. “I haven’t looked at the data that is out there.”

The planning commission showdown

When Greene and Quality Enterprises last year sought approval from the Collier County planning commission to expand blasting – as well as double the frequency of the blasts allowed – a contingent of homeowners showed up to oppose the plan.

The residents, including Dixon, all claimed their houses are cracking as a result of the blasting even though the current explosions are technically below regulatory limits.

Countering the homeowners was Richard Yovanovich, the mining company’s land-use lawyer. He specifically referenced the September 14, 2023 blast that badly rocked Dixon’s home and said the company implemented measures to redirect the blasting away from Golden Gate Estates. Yet even then he insisted the explosions were not causing damage to the homes.

“We came out, met with the neighbors, heard their concerns and made adjustments to the operations,” Yovanovich told the commission at the Feb. 1, 2024



Mining officials want to increase the blasting zone. (Credit: Facebook/Quality Enterprises USA, Inc.)

meeting. "The science shows we are doing what's required. We will not create a problem if we expand the boundaries to 1,300 feet."

He noted that Collier County inspectors are present at the mine for every blast, monitoring seismograph readings and verifying site conditions. Blankenship, the Quality Enterprises' manager, told the commission of his visits to affected homes, including Dixon's. He said he took photos and saw "mostly stucco cracks," but did not

investigate further. Both Yovanovich and Blankenship argued that residents had not presented any scientific data to prove the blasting caused damage to surrounding homes.

Ten residents spoke at the hearing, describing mystery cracks, shuddering homes, and a persistent sense of living in a war zone. "Our homes are not built [for] explosions," homeowner Carlos Garcia told the planning commission. "There's no place for this near our homes."

Other homeowners like Heather Wallace and Ken Schmidt recalled initially mistaking the blasts for sonic booms. Both told the planning commission that their respective homes now have cracked foundations.

Board members Paul Shea and Christopher Vernon were sympathetic to the residents and questioned why more wasn't being done by mine owners to independently analyze home damage and groundwater samples. "I think you need to do more homework to prove [cracks] weren't caused by blasting," said Vernon.

But they were the only two board members to vote against recommending approval for expanded blasting. Their four colleagues voted yes and approved the measure, setting up a vote by McDaniel and the county commission. If the expansion is approved, homeowners can expect five more years of blasting to finish excavating the remaining limestone within the 2,800 acres, Blankenship said.

Blankenship told the *Florida Trident* that the application to expand the blasting area is currently in “stand-by mode” and that no request to go before the county commission for final approval has been made.

“The problem is people are not told that there is an active mine,” Blankenship said. “They don’t do their homework about where they are buying. In five years, it will be completely done. Then the complaints will be about the new homes that will be built.”

Dixon said that kind of dismissive attitude is typical.

“That is a bunch of crap coming out of his mouth,” he said. “Everyone thought that mine was done a long time ago. I have spent two years putting the research together. We’re the sacrificial lambs here.”

About the author: Francisco Alvarado is an investigative journalist based in Miami whose work has appeared in The Daily Beast, The Guardian, and The Washington Post.



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