

MITCHELL NEWS-JOURNAL

Print Page

Wednesday, March 16, 2005

Rock slide is a "gravity thing"

Nathan Hall

News-Journal Staff

State officials reopened a portion of Oak Avenue that was blocked by a landslide, but a local expert said there is nothing that can be done to stop more debris from falling.

"It's a gravity thing," said Alex Glover, geologist for Zemex Industrial Minerals. "It's a fact of nature, there's nothing to do to stop the process."

The Department of Transportation placed Jersey barriers along the base of the bank, blocking one of the lanes at the stoplight. Glover said the town can install permanent barriers to block or catch falling debris, but said the construction will be expensive. He said there is no way to permanently stabilize the bank.

"It's a bad situation," he said, pointing to a large slab of exposed rock, its sections clearly slanted toward Oak Avenue. "It's like a stack of dominoes, tilted, and now loosening and falling apart."

Glover said the sections of rock are called "Ash", a group of old ocean-type sediments mixed with volcanic sediments. He said the formations, millions of years old, were originally formed to be flat, but shifted due to mountain building. He said as the rock degrades, it forms Saprolite - which is basically weathered, rotten rock.

He said water from rainfall can further loosen the rock and make it easier to slide.

But there is good news.

"Other (downtown) businesses are not in jeopardy," he said. "What happens here won't necessarily happen over there, the rock types are different."

He said the rock walls behind other businesses on Oak Avenue are not slanted downward, making them more stable.

While it's not impossible for these walls to crumble and fall, Glover said "It's less likely."

Spruce Pine Town Manager Richard Canipe said he spoke with DOT District Engineer Doug McNeil Monday afternoon.

Canipe said DOT has surveyed the land and plans to talk with property owners before Progress Energy reroutes power to kill the electricity in the lines above the slide. Canipe said DOT will then begin grading the slope, making several levels intended to make the bank more stable. Canipe said construction should take around one week, and said he expects the road to be closed occasionally during the work period.

Copyright © 2006 Mitchell News-Journal