

How a Ritzy L.A. Enclave Learned a Bitter Lesson About the Limits of Its Wealth

Calabasas residents thought it would be easy to keep wildfire ash from being trucked to their local landfill. They were wrong.

By Nathaniel Rich

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Besides posing a humanitarian problem, an insurance problem, an economic problem and a public-health problem, the Los Angeles fires of 2025 posed a daunting garbage problem. The incineration of 50,000 acres of Los Angeles County converted some 18,000 homes into 2.6 million tons of waste. That is more than the entire city of Philadelphia produces in a year — and it doesn't even account for all the charred vehicles and trees. Where would all the trash go?

A further complication: Much of the waste was probably toxic. Any home built before 1980 is most likely coated with lead paint and insulated with asbestos. Nearly every residence in the United States can be safely assumed to contain batteries, cleaning solvents, computers and plastics. Even compounds naturally found in soil, like trivalent chromium, can be transformed by wildfires into the highly carcinogenic hexavalent chromium — the contaminant made famous by the movie “Erin Brockovich.” Because of these assumptions, it is standard practice, after a fire, to clear structures, remove six inches of soil and conduct tests to ensure that no hazardous compounds remain.

State and federal law requires hazardous waste to be sent to permitted hazardous-waste facilities. The closest one, in the San Joaquin Valley, is 2½ hours north of Pacific Palisades, but only when there's no traffic on Interstate 405, which is like saying Los Angeles is rainy but only when it's not sunny. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimated that it would take at least 110,000 dump trucks to clear the debris from Los Angeles County. (In fact it would be more than twice that.)

The predicament posed a set of diabolical SAT questions: If each truck had to travel 10 hours round-trip, how many months would it take to clean up Pacific Palisades and Altadena? How much diesel fuel would be required, with what attendant carbon emissions and air pollution? How much would that cost? And who would pay for it?

The Los Angeles fires were one of the most destructive wildfire events in California's history. They were also among the most predictable. "The hots are getting a lot hotter. Dries are getting a lot dryer. The wets are getting a lot wetter. That's climate change." And that was Gov. Gavin Newsom more than five years ago, after a different, only somewhat less catastrophic fire. A Los Angeles County report the same year concluded that 386 square miles of the county lay in a "Very High" Fire Hazard Severity Zone and projected that climate change would make those fires more frequent and chaotic. Yet the images of the flaming metropolis — the eradicated acres, the incandescent grid seen from orbit, the Hollywood sign engulfed by smoke — seemed to inaugurate a new category of climate disaster, one that might be too expensive to overcome, even for the world's richest society.

But it could try. In the case of the 2.6 million tons, at least, somebody in a position of influence at the state or federal level — the person's identity may never be publicly known — hit upon an ingenious solution. The fire ash would simply *not be tested* for hazardous compounds. If you didn't test the ash, you couldn't prove it was toxic. And without evidence of toxicity, all the ash could be shipped, immediately, to the nearest residential landfill.



The Calabasas Landfill was cleared by Los Angeles County to receive up to 5,000 tons of ash from the Pacific Palisades fire every day for at least six months. Kevin Cooley for The New York Times

The nearest landfill to Pacific Palisades is a scenic, tortuous, 30-minute drive up Malibu Canyon. It lies in the high saddle of the gently sloping Santa Monica Mountains, in a depression carved out of the chaparral. Administered by the Los Angeles County Sanitation Districts, the landfill is encircled by, and overlooks, one of the nation's wealthiest communities, in recent years home to, among many others, Will Smith, John Travolta, Justin Bieber, Kevin Hart, Jessica Simpson, Jake Paul, Katie Holmes, Kanye West and a bunch of Kardashians: the city of Calabasas.

It is not much of an exaggeration to say that nobody in Calabasas, upon hearing of the decision to send the remains of Pacific Palisades to the local landfill, could believe it. Many residents couldn't believe that Calabasas *had* a landfill.

“I was like, ‘The Calabasas Landfill?’” said Michelle Geller, a corporate and securities lawyer who moved from Santa Monica a year earlier with her husband and son. “Who would think, in the middle of this beautiful community?” she said. “But I did research and realized it’s right here.”

Geller was not exaggerating. When she stood on the front terrace of her townhouse, the landfill was *right there*: plainly visible, at eye level, precisely one mile away.

“If I knew about the landfill, I wouldn’t have moved here,” said Geller, whose son was born with one kidney. She soon found a body of health studies showing that increased rates of cancer, birth defects and mortality were detected in populations living within a 1.8-mile radius of landfills. Within 1.8 miles of the Calabasas Landfill are nine schools, 10 parks and, as of this writing, 11 houses listed for more than \$4 million. (The \$25 million homes begin appearing two miles from the landfill.)

In late January, when Geller called the landfill, the person who answered confirmed that it would begin accepting fire debris in mid-March. “In my head, I was thinking, OK, we have almost two months to try to get this stopped before it happens,” she said. Geller figured that, for a community as capable as Calabasas, two months would be more than enough time.

Later that week, she attended the quarterly meeting of Calabasas’ Environmental Commission. The commission members — five kindly volunteers and a nonvoting high school student — sat along the dais of City Hall’s wood-paneled City Council chambers beneath the Calabasas seal, a red-tailed hawk soaring above green mountains. Geller waited in growing consternation as the commissioners gave exhaustive updates on Calabasas High School’s composting bins, the campaign to transform plastic bags into park benches and the Arbor Day celebration in Wild Walnut Park. When the public-comment period opened, Geller was the first speaker.

“Obviously our hearts go out to everyone that lost homes in the fire,” she said. “The concern is that we have learned that the Calabasas Landfill is going to be accepting fire debris as early as March.”

The commissioners stared at her blankly.

“And if you guys don’t know,” Geller continued, “and I’ve just alerted you, that’s even more concerning.”

The commissioners didn’t know that hazardous waste would be coming to Calabasas. The City Council didn’t know. The mayor didn’t know. A few days earlier, a resident asked Alicia Weintraub, a Council member and former mayor, about a rumor that the toxic ash was coming to Calabasas. “There’s no way,” Weintraub reassured her constituent. “That’s not possible.”

The Calabasas Landfill was a Class III Solid Waste facility — the most basic designation. “There are landfills designed to handle toxic waste,” said Dan Weisbach, who lives less than a mile from the Calabasas Landfill. “This is where, when you peel a carrot, that’s where it goes. It’s not where you can go dump paint.” Nor does the Calabasas Landfill accept electronic waste, tires with rims or detergent. The landfill refuses AA batteries. It refuses prescription medicine. It refuses salt.

But on Feb. 10, the Calabasas Landfill appeared on a list, released by the county, of landfills designated to accept fire debris. The same day, Newsom issued a statement praising the “record-breaking speed” of the cleanup operation. “We’re cutting through the red tape,” he declared.

This particular scrap of red tape was holding together the state’s two major omnibus environmental laws. The California Environmental Quality Act, signed in 1970 by Gov. Ronald Reagan and a model for similar laws in many other states, requires that any new development undergo substantial environmental review. The California Coastal Act, signed in 1976, gives the state additional regulatory powers over development in the coastal zone, including in Los Angeles County. Newsom used his emergency powers to suspend both.

On Feb. 12, Col. Brian Sawser of the Army Corps of Engineers, wearing his fatigues, accepted an invitation to appear before the Calabasas City Council. By then, the neighborhood WhatsApp groups, text threads and Nextdoor had swollen

into a cataract of outrage; more than 100 residents awaited their three minutes at the lectern.

Weintraub began by asking Sawser whether hazardous waste would be sent to Calabasas.

“Ash as it is in your fireplace is hazardous,” Sawser replied.

Every property in Pacific Palisades, he continued, was tested on site for asbestos. Workers also conducted a visual inspection and shipped any objects that were conspicuously hazardous (propane tanks, lithium batteries), as well as vehicles, metals and chunks of cement, brick and rock, to designated waste and recycling facilities. But all remaining debris would be trucked to landfills. Sawser acknowledged that his workers in the Palisades wore respirator masks and hazmat suits.

“Is there something left in that ash?” Sawser mused. “Nothing on that list that we know of. But it’s as hazardous as any ash product can be.” He emphasized, as many officials would over the coming months, that he was “not a scientist.”

“Can you be 100 percent certain that no waste that is hazardous will end up in the landfill?” Weintraub asked.

“Ma’am,” Sawser said, “I taught probability and statistics at West Point, so I’m going to be hard pressed to be 100 percent certain of anything. So I’m not trying to equivocate. No, I will not offer you 100 percent.”

The city manager pointed out that 200,000 tons of debris from the Woolsey fire was dumped in the Calabasas Landfill in 2018, after a similar emergency waiver was granted.

This did not satisfy the Council members. Los Angeles County had cleared Calabasas to accept up to 5,000 tons of ash from the Palisades fire every day for at least six months. The Woolsey fire had burned in mostly uninhabited areas, not

dense urban neighborhoods, destroying less than one-tenth as many structures as the 2025 fires. And some samples of Woolsey fire ash were found to contain radioactive waste.

“I moved to California four years ago,” said Natasha Downing, an actress and mother of two young children, “and Calabasas has exceeded my wildest dreams.” But now she was worried about cancer clusters, chronic respiratory illnesses and brain damage from the inhalation of lead and arsenic — all side effects that studies had found after exposure to wildfire smoke and ash. “I love my home. I worked my whole life to buy my home, and I hoped to live here forever,” she continued. “But if this waste comes to the landfill, I have to move.” She added, “My children’s lives are literally at risk.”



"I worked my whole life to buy my home," Natasha Downing said, "and I hoped to live here forever." Kevin Cooley for The New York Times

Kelly Martino, a mother of two, is the regional director of property management for a company that controls 10,000 units in Los Angeles built before 1977, when asbestos was still commonly used in residential construction. Martino was

convinced, no matter what spot testing had been done on site, that the Palisades ash was laced with asbestos. At the Council meeting, she announced plans to hold a protest at the landfill. “Moms could rule the world much better than the people who rule it now,” she said. “We intend to stop this.”

Geller compared the clearing of the Palisades to the cleanup of the World Trade Center site after the Sept. 11 attacks. More people, she pointed out, have died from diseases caused by exposure to hazardous waste at ground zero than from the terrorist attacks themselves. The federal World Trade Center Health Program monitors hundreds of thousands of people who were in Lower Manhattan for 52 health conditions, including a dozen kinds of airway and digestive disorders and more than 15 types of cancer.

“I don’t think the Calabasas community wants a victim fund in 10 or 15 years,” Geller said. As she spoke, her voice rose, her tone entering the Cassandra register. The mayor, Peter Kraut, interrupted, trying to tell her that her time was up. She ignored him. Calabasas, she said, “is one of the only landfills in California that’s near a residential area, a residential area with parks that my child, my 5-year-old *with one kidney*, plays at.”

Kraut pounded the gavel, calling for order.

“I’d like to devote my three minutes to her,” someone in the gallery called out, to swelling cheers.

“We are going to hire an attorney!” Geller shouted, her back turned from Kraut, the City Council and Sawser. She addressed her fellow citizens: “We are going to get this stopped! Calabasas is not going to sit back and wait to be another 9/11!”

The environmental-justice movement emerged from landfills. In 1978, the governor of North Carolina announced plans to dump tens of thousands of tons of soil contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) — compounds also prevalent in wildfire ash — in a majority-Black county, one of the state’s poorest. For the next four years, there were protests, lawsuits and more than 500 arrests. In the end, the state dumped a smaller share of the waste, 7,000 tons, but a movement was born.

Its intellectual leader was Robert Bullard, a sociology professor who, as he later put it, got “dragged into this” when his wife, a lawyer, asked for his help with a lawsuit fighting a proposed landfill in Houston. Bullard noticed that all the publicly owned landfills in the area were in Black neighborhoods. He also observed, more generally, that the national environmental movement that emerged during the 1970s was supported by middle- and upper-middle-class white people with an above-average education, even though “toxic dumping and the location of locally unwanted land uses” disproportionately burdened Black and poor communities.

“How are the benefits and burdens of environmental reform distributed?” he asked in his foundational 1990 book, “Dumping in Dixie.” “Who gets what, where, and why?” Historically, white people got their way, he wrote, while Black people and the poor got dumped on. As white environmentalists made NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) cases against hazardous waste, government and industry responded with what Bullard called the “PIBBY” principle: “place in Blacks’ backyard.”

When viewed in isolation, the statements made by Calabasas residents during the last few months are indistinguishable from those heard in recent years in places like Flint, Mich.; Jackson, Miss.; and Mossville, in the heart of Louisiana’s Cancer Alley. Edward Albrecht, a Calabasas City Council member, expressed his disbelief that the city was “powerless to have an influence on what’s going to happen.”

Pegah Pourrahipi, whose children attend the same elementary school that she did, about a mile from the landfill, said, “It just doesn’t make any sense in the long term, but I don’t think they care.” Ariella Schrader, a television producer and mother of two, said: “I truly feel that they are gambling with our lives. I mean, what are we waiting for? Children to die?”

By most other metrics, however, Calabasas is the anti-Flint, the anti-Jackson, the anti-Mossville. It is one the richest cities in the United States. Only one in 40 residents is Black. Its schools are among the best in the state. The life expectancy far exceeds the national average, as do the rates of advanced degrees, electric-vehicle chargers and equestrian barns.



“What good is privilege if you’re still being poisoned?” Ariella Schrader said. Kevin Cooley for The New York Times

Central to Bullard’s conception of environmental justice is the principle of “personal efficacy”: the measure, in part, of a community’s faith in its political representation. If residents complain, will anyone listen? In most cases of environmental injustice, a victimized community believes that nobody will.

It is hard to imagine a community with a healthier sense of personal efficacy than Calabasas. “Usually, communities like ours are not victimized by environmental injustice, because they have some level of power and influence,” said James Bozajian, a Council member who has served the city in some capacity for more

than three decades and publishes a regular column in the local paper about the region's history. "The city has fought many battles over the years, and we usually have been arrayed against some very powerful interests."

The battles that Calabasans have fought they have tended to win. They blocked a supermarket from razing a historic property and defeated the construction of a highway that would have run through downtown. In 2003, they successfully thwarted plans to build an entire city on nearly 3,000 acres just north of town; after an 11-year legal battle, Gov. Gray Davis interceded on Calabasas' behalf, using a discretionary fund to preserve the land as a state park.

One gets the impression, in Calabasas, that no resident is more than two degrees removed from any elected official in the nation. In the days after the landfill decision was announced, at least two "old friends" of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. called him to demand that he intervene. Kennedy is routinely referred to in conversation as "Bobby." The governor is "Gavin." After the Kardashians called Newsom, the governor's office arranged for them, and the film crew from their Hulu show, a private tour of the landfill.

When a community in the United States confronts a grave environmental threat, it asks itself: Who will be our Erin Brockovich? Calabasas had its answer: Erin Brockovich. Two days after the City Council meeting, Brockovich posted a video from the kitchen of her home in Agoura Hills, which borders Calabasas and the landfill, urging her followers to protest.

Barefoot in an F.D.N.Y. bomber jacket, Brockovich stood between Kelly Martino and Natasha Downing, whose infant daughter slept on her chest in a baby carrier. "Never ever underestimate the power of a pissed off mom," Brockovich wrote in her accompanying newsletter. "When you mess with their kids' health and their community, they will organize, and they will fight for justice."

The money, power and flexible weekday schedules of the residents yielded instant successes. Local television news crews followed Kourtney and Khloe Kardashian to local protests, where they spoke to reporters and waved placards ("Fill Our Hydrants, Not Our Dumps!!"). A GoFundMe campaign raised \$76,482 to employ a

major Los Angeles firm, Greenberg Glusker, for a residents' lawsuit against the county to block the delivery of ash. The city's operating budget was robust enough to fund its own lawsuit, and it filed for an immediate injunction and a temporary restraining order.

The gated community nearest to the landfill, Mont Calabasas, raised \$2,500 to install an air monitor. Kelly Martino and other residents of Saratoga Hills, the neighborhood that borders the landfill on its southern rim, raised \$9,000 toward installing an even more sophisticated air monitor in Grape Arbor Park, the picturesque neighborhood park that stands along the landfill's access road. Through various personal connections, teams of experts at U.C.L.A. and U.C.-Davis were enlisted to conduct air, soil and water studies.

Local residents, many of whom held advanced medical, legal and public-health degrees, conducted their own research. They learned about the relative dangers, and dispersibility, of fine and ultrafine particulate matter. They studied local wind patterns and learned that gusts carried airborne particles from the Calabasas Landfill straight downhill. They learned that runoff from the fires traveled as far as 100 miles offshore, worsening toxic algae blooms and leading to so many beached sea mammals that Los Angeles's Marine Mammal Care Center had to treat sea lions in its parking lot. The Calabasans also learned that exposure to wildfire ash increased the risks of asthma, sinus infections, eye irritations, kidney damage, emphysema, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer, brain cancer, Alzheimer's, strokes and heart attacks. They learned that the effects of ash exposure may be even worse in children.



Kourtney Kardashian at a protest on Feb. 27, 10 days after the first trucks were cleared to arrive at the landfill with wildfire ash. Getty Images

As in any public-health crisis, residents did what they could manage to protect their families. In Calabasas, they could manage a lot. Monica Lieberman, a media director who moved to Calabasas with her husband and infant son in 2020, bought air filters and a water filter for her house and a portable air filter for her car. Pegah Pourrahipi moved a few of the industrial air filters she uses in her dental practice to her house. When the particulate levels spiked, she kept her windows shut and discouraged her children from playing outside. “My kids are my whole world and my life,” she said. “This is something no parent should have to navigate.”

Pourrahipi, like the other residents, didn't know whether the filtered air in her home was considerably cleaner than the air outside, but she figured it couldn't be any worse.

The terror of these early weeks yielded another, unexpected transformation in Calabasas. For many in the community, particularly those who had arrived during the Covid years in search of better schools and fresh air, the landfill crisis sparked a sense of civic solidarity. Natasha Downing had made just two friends since moving with her husband from New York City four years earlier. She had stopped auditioning to focus on raising her young children. But now she found herself at the center of a movement. She spent her days collecting samples of water and soil from the creek that ran behind the Albertson's grocery store, speaking with emotional force at city meetings, granting interviews and leading hundred-person protests in front of the landfill with a bullhorn.

"It was the first time in a very, very long time that I felt like I was actually doing something with my life that mattered," Downing said. "I thought we'd have this done in a couple weeks. And then I wanted to help other people who are being poisoned, and help them fight too."

The trucks were given clearance to begin dumping on Monday, Feb. 17, a month earlier than originally indicated. That morning, more than 100 residents, led by Kourtney Kardashian, the former Playboy Playmate Kendra Wilkinson and a bunch of children, formed a blockade in front of the landfill. At 8 a.m., the trucks began to arrive — 15-ton dump trucks subcontracted from all over the state. The police officers dispatched to the scene were helpful, even deferential. They allowed the protesters to stand their ground and promised to give warnings before making any arrests. The truckers idling behind the blockade, who were paid by the load, were not so charitable and addressed the sign-waving women with collective slurs.

"People don't care about a city like Calabasas," Ariella Schrader said. "When the Palisades homes burned down, it's like: 'They'll be fine. They have enough money to rebuild.' And with Calabasas, it's the same type of mentality. Whereas Cancer

Alley, it's like: 'Oh, my God, these poor people! So heartbreaking!' What's the difference? We're all humans!"

The first blockade lasted all day; no truck entered the landfill. The blockade resumed Tuesday: a multigenerational Calabasas block party, accompanied by a decorous police escort, and a line of furious truck drivers, their beds brimming with tons of ash. The blockade continued Wednesday and Thursday. On Friday, lawyers for the City of Calabasas appeared in Los Angeles County Superior Court to present arguments for their restraining order. The county announced that no trucks would be sent to the landfill while the judge considered them. The threat appeared averted.

Three days later, however, the judge denied the request. Although the Calabasas Landfill was not permitted to accept hazardous waste, it was authorized to accept fire debris. (That authorization dated to a 2008 emergency proclamation by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger that allowed wildfires debris to be sent to lined Class III landfills, among them Calabasas.) The apparent contradiction at the heart of this order — that hazardous waste could not be dumped in residential landfills, except after fires, in enormous quantities — did not trouble the court's conscience. The same day, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to expand the area from which the Calabasas Landfill could accept fire ash. The trucks returned with alacrity, as if making up for lost time.



Many Calabasas residents weren't aware that there was a landfill in town. Kevin Cooley for The New York Times

The protesters returned too, for a couple of days, but on Feb. 27, the police made an arrest. Officers did not handcuff one of the mothers with infants strapped to their chests, but they waited until a middle-aged man took over the bullhorn. “They

were very kind people,” the man admits today. (The vice president of a local business, he requested anonymity because of the criminal charge.) “They treated me fairly. I was OK with the whole situation.”

The residents’ appetite for confrontation, however, had soured. Fewer than 20 people showed up at the landfill protest the following day. Two days later, there were 10. Then nobody came to the landfill at all, except the trucks, which never seemed to stop.

This spring, it was not uncommon to see a truck pass by every 10 seconds on Calabasas’ main streets. Residents noticed a difference in the air. “We feel it,” said Michal Keswick, whose son was having coughing fits. “We know what’s happening.”

Many parents plunged into existential crises. “There’s always a nagging butterfly in my stomach,” Keswick said. “Am I doing the right thing for my kids, exposing them to harm every day? It puts you in this angry state. We’re exposed to crap everywhere, but knowing that this landfill is in our backyard is really draining.”

Exhaustion gave way to paralysis. “If I was smart, I’d move,” Ariella Schrader said. But that wouldn’t be easy. “We work in the entertainment industry,” she said. “We have roots here. My husband and I have lived in L.A. our entire lives. What are we supposed to do?”

Seeking a productive channel for their anxiety, outraged residents spent their days as citizen sleuths. They stalked the truck routes, taking videos and forwarding them to government officials.

“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve written to Newsom,” said Melissa Olen, a real estate broker and mother of three who moved to Calabasas to live in a place that was far more environmentally conscious than her hometown. That hometown was Boston. “I love the plastic-bag ban,” she said. “I love electric cars. I love the whole thing. I have higher expectations than this.” Olen compiled dozens of clips of protective tarps flapping loosely in the wind, piles of ash spilled onto the road, trucks illegally parked, trucks failing to come to a full stop at a stop sign.

Tonia Arey, a local real estate agent, photographed cigarette butts left discarded on the road beside the parked trucks. It is illegal for dump trucks to park in Calabasas. It is illegal, in any public space in Calabasas, to light a cigarette.

It began to dawn on the residents of Calabasas that no matter how much money they raised or how many phone calls they made, nobody felt sorry for them. The local state senator, Ben Allen, sent beseeching letters to the governor's office without effect. The local county supervisor, Lindsey Horvath, stopped returning calls from constituents or City Council members.

"What does she care if it's being dumped here?" Tonia Arey said. "She lives in West Hollywood." ("Supervisor Horvath cares deeply for our Calabasas community," a spokeswoman wrote in an email. "The lawsuit that was filed made continued dialogue and partnership on the landfill challenging. Throughout the fires and now, in our active recovery, Supervisor Horvath has demonstrated an unrelenting commitment to supporting our residents, businesses, and first responders through one of the worst disasters in our County's history.") Arey has decided to run for Horvath's seat.

Many felt betrayed by Robert F. Kennedy Jr. — not so much politically as personally. "Calabasas in general has been a huge supporter of his," Ariella Schrader said. "He's Mr. Environmental Lawyer, right? I feel completely abandoned by him. I'm heartbroken."

Their social media campaigns engendered as much resentment as sympathy. "At first we felt empowered," Schrader said. "But then it was just like: 'What, should the ash go to a poorer city? Way to use your white, rich privilege.'"

Residents were sensitive to the criticism. "There's a stigma, living in Calabasas," Michal Keswick said. "We don't care about you because you're quote-unquote wealthy. I get it. But I just want to raise my kids in a safe, law-abiding place. I hope that for everybody, not just for us."

City officials, meanwhile, could not figure out who made the decision to send the ash to Calabasas. The county blamed the Army Corps; the Army Corps said it received a list of landfills from the county. The governor's office directed inquiries from The Times to CalRecycle's office of public affairs, which said in an email, "The United States Army Corps of Engineers, under the Trump administration, selected the Calabasas landfill from an eligible list."

By April, evidence began to appear that suggested the Calabasans' anxieties were justified. Because the state and federal government would not fund soil testing of the Palisades and Altadena, Los Angeles County's Department of Public Health began its own program; preliminary results showed elevated levels of arsenic, among other hazardous compounds, in samples taken from plots in the Palisades.

James Bozajian, the Council member, emphasized that Calabasas' political influence had limits. "Usually what happens is people in economically depressed areas, who are powerless, are the ones who are stomped on," Bozajian said. "But now we're being stomped on. We had an unprecedented fire. That takes it outside the magnitude of something that a city like ours can have much of a say about."

The landfill imbroglio was the first test of a new kind of crisis, one that would inevitably be repeated in the hotter and drier decades to come. California, it was clear to Bozajian, had failed the test.

Despite having the most robust environmental laws in the nation, the state, at the very moment of greatest need, ignored them. "As you get more and more deadly natural disasters in California, particularly fires," Bozajian said, "I wonder if some of the old patterns" — the patterns of environmental protection, regulation and deference to aggrieved parties — "start to break down."

The sense of civic solidarity, in any case, began to erode in the weeks after the denial of the city's request for a restraining order. Greenberg Glusker, which had already run through the \$76,000 raised by the GoFundMe campaign, asked for a retainer of \$250,000, Michelle Geller said, offending many residents.

“Everybody kept saying, ‘Why can’t we get a pro bono?’” Geller said. “Well, Calabasas is pretty much the most expensive ZIP code in the state of California. And I’m a realist. It represents the top 1 percent of the country. We’re not pulling on any law firm’s heart strings.” After a series of last-ditch efforts to raise more money, including a private appeal to the Kardashians, the residents dropped their suit.



Michelle Geller alerted the Calabasas Environmental Commission to the plans for the wildfire ash. She has since moved with her family to Ventura County. Kevin Cooley for The New York Times

More modest requests made through official channels were flatly rebuffed. When Dallas Lawrence, the president of the local board of education, asked the state's air-management agency to install air monitors at various locations in Calabasas, including a middle and high school, it refused. When the City of Calabasas offered to pay for an independent environmental firm to test the ash at the landfill, Los Angeles County declined and did not explain its rationale.

“Our one ask, from Day 1, has been: Test the ash,” said Lawrence, a communications specialist who served in the George W. Bush administration. “If you would simply test every truckload that comes here, this community would feel great. It’s not a tough ask. That’s why it’s so shocking. What are you afraid of?”

It was a rhetorical question. Everyone knew what the state was afraid of. Without testing, there could be no results. Without results, the ash would continue to be dumped in Calabasas and, sooner rather than later, Pacific Palisades would rebuild — sooner, perhaps, than July 2028, when Los Angeles will host the Summer Olympics.

In June, after months of thwarted efforts, the City of Calabasas received a favorable ruling in its case against Los Angeles County: The Superior Court ruled that Calabasas had the right to test the fire debris deposited in the landfill. The court decision seemed to have an effect: For the next seven weeks, the county and Calabasas tried to negotiate a settlement.

No agreement was reached, however, and finally, on Aug. 11, experts hired by the city took 20 samples from four trucks arriving at the landfill. By then, 210,000 tons of fire debris had been deposited. The rest of the fire ash from the Eaton and Palisades fires has been dispersed across three other authorized facilities, with the bulk going to the Simi Valley Landfill.

The composition of wildfire ash varies from plot to plot, even square inch to square inch — the difference between a burned privet hedge and a burned car battery. In April, when The Los Angeles Times conducted its own testing of the Palisades and Altadena after federal and state agencies refused, it found plots with elevated levels of arsenic, lead and mercury. In May, Los Angeles County’s Department of

Public Health released final data that showed high levels of lead in about 12 percent of Palisades properties not yet cleared of debris. In July, The Times found that fire ash contaminated with asbestos was accidentally trucked to the nonhazardous landfills that were authorized to accept fire debris, and possibly to Calabasas.

No one seems to be certain about what will happen — legally, politically or environmentally — if any of the samples taken from Calabasas show toxicity. But consensus has been achieved on one point: The only thing worse than confirming the existence of hazardous waste in the landfill would be removing it. Digging up hundreds of thousands of tons of buried waste and loading it into trucks that carry it back down the hill through town would kick up fresh plumes of toxic dust, exposing the community all over again. Once toxic waste is properly buried, it should no longer pose a threat to the air above it — just to the land and groundwater below it.

The landfill's operators claim that the seven layers of composite lining beneath the landfill offer sufficient protection. But Calabasas' mayor, Peter Kraut, doesn't believe it. "We're basically taking an environmental problem from the Pacific Palisades and moving it to Calabasas. When are we going to see a problem from that? Could be 10 years down the road, but I do think it's going to be in our groundwater downstream."

Should toxic chemicals one day leak from the landfill, it could contaminate the soil, the local creeks or the ocean, into which they drain. The city's drinking water, which comes from the California Aqueduct, would not be affected. But something larger, and less quantifiable, already has been: Calabasas' inviolable sense of security, of purity, of protection from the threats of the outside world. Kraut called this "the magic that creates this community. It just has this sense of peace, this sense of serenity." Now residents would regard every creek, the soil, even the air itself with suspicion.

The leaders of the landfill movement were among the first to put their houses up for sale. Kelly Martino moved her family to Westlake Village before she even listed her home in Saratoga Hills. After Michelle Geller's pediatrician told her that it

wouldn't be wise to keep her son near the landfill, she moved 30 miles away, to Ventura County. Natasha Downing planned to spend the summer in New York, hoping that by the time she returned, the trucks would be gone and all the ash safely buried — though she had not ruled out moving to Westchester. Many residents who saw the landfill crisis as yet another iteration of Californian incompetence and hypocrisy were looking much farther afield, to Colorado, Montana, Arizona and Texas. But they did so with a newfound wariness.



The landfill and Saratoga Hills. Kevin Cooley for The New York Times

“I don’t want anyone to cry over Calabasas,” Dan Weisbach said in his backyard in Saratoga Hills. “This is not a marginalized community, like some poor town outside of Houston or in Louisiana where they manufacture pesticides. Calabasas is a

beautiful place to live. It's nestled in the hills, the property values are really high, the schools are great and there's none of the riffraff you see in L.A. with the homeless problem. But the powers that be are choosing expediency over safety. If they can do it to this community, that means they could do it to anybody."

That, for many residents, was the most haunting revelation of all. The 2025 fires had augured a future in which even a Calabasan could suffer sudden and catastrophic environmental injustice.

"As many influential and resourceful people that we have in Calabasas, we still can't get it stopped," Ariella Schrader said. "There's no amount of money that can make you feel protected. It doesn't matter. People think we have all this privilege. What good is privilege if you're still being poisoned? It doesn't matter how much money you have or how little, we're still going to get poisoned just the same."

Local real estate agents, however, were more guarded in their concern. Tonia Arey, whose fury over the landfill had inspired her to run for public office, pointed out that this pocket of Southern California regularly faced existential crises.

She pointed to the hills at the end of Las Virgenes Road. During Woolsey, they were aflame. "Nine houses burned to the ground," she said. "When you wake up and see David Muir on your street, you know it's not good." In the short term, she expected the landfill would hurt home values slightly — "a sting."

She took in the Santa Monica Mountains, the couple sipping coffee at a sidewalk cafe, the young mother pushing a stroller up the hill. "Check back in about six months," she said. "Even if there's another hellish fire season, the landfill will be out of sight, out of mind. As many people that leave, just as many will move in."

Here, at last, was one conviction shared by the residents of Calabasas and the political leaders of the county and state. Yes, Calabasas had its wildfires and relaxed environmental protections and airborne toxic events, but what community didn't? Where could you be safe from fires, or earthquakes, hurricanes, air and water pollution, lax federal regulations, droughts and heat waves and rising seas? Calabasas, at least, was still Calabasas. And everywhere else was not.

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