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Union Carbide scraps move of toxic gas plant

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A plant that produces toxic gases for the electronics industry will not be moving from La Mesa to Washington state after all, Union Carbide officials announced yesterday.

The giant chemical company still plans to relocate Phoenix Research Corp. but scrapped the move to the town of Washougal because of poor growth prospects in the semiconductor business, said James D. Secor Jr., Union Carbide communications director.

Secor said protests by some of the town's 4,200 residents did not influence the company's decision three weeks ago to halt the promised move.

The protests, said Secor, "made us happy in the sense that we saved \$5 million by not building a plant there." Washougal is located 12 miles east of Portland, Ore.

Despite assurances from Union Carbide that the plant would employ stringent safety measures, some Washougal residents formed Group Action to Stop Poisoning, or GASP, and questioned whether the safety measures could prevent a disaster like the one that killed more than 2,300 persons at Bhopal, India. A gas leak at a Union Carbide plant there on Dec. 3, 1984, also injured 50,000 persons.

Union Carbide has defended Phoenix Research, which has produced the gases arsine and phosphine at its Alvarado Road plant for 13 years without incident.

The gases are used to manufacture of silicon chips and can injure or kill a person when inhaled in large amounts.

Last summer, Union Carbide officials announced they would move Phoenix Research after La Mesa officials expressed concerns over the plant's operations.

Phoenix president Randall Kelly yesterday said it was too early to predict where or when the plant would move.

Councilman Art Madrid yesterday said the city, although concerned about the plant's existence, has been pleased with its efforts to relocate and to upgrade its safety systems.

"Those people have been damn good corporate citizens," Madrid said.

He said that Phoenix's lease expires in 1991 and that he's convinced the firm will leave in a few years.

The company, meanwhile, is appealing a finding by the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District, which ruled Dec. 31 that Phoenix had to stop producing the gases because it failed to prove that an accidental gas leak would not harm the surrounding area.

Phoenix challenged the ruling and on Jan. 12 won a court order allowing it to continue production of the gases until the APCD hears the company's appeal.

Randall said his company meets all regulatory requirements and that APCD doesn't have jurisdiction over Phoenix because pollutants aren't released into the atmosphere.

The hearing before APCD began in February and is scheduled to resume April 13.

Infobox

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