

Residents voice concern over cement plant near Cupertino

Matt Wilson, San Jose Mercury News, 12-31-10

They came armed with signs, speeches and lots of frustration. Dozens of Cupertino and other Santa Clara County residents packed Cupertino Community Hall on Dec. 21 to vent their frustration and concern yet again regarding the Lehigh Southwest Cement plant, which has operated for decades just outside the city.

More than 50 residents spoke for two minutes each, urging the Cupertino City Council to either send a letter or adopt a resolution to forward to the county to do more to regulate the cement and quarry facility.

"These are elected officials, they are respected elected officials by the board of supervisors and much more respected than individual residents," said Bill Almon, a Los Altos resident and founder of the group Quarry No. "We would like them to take a stand and recognize everything that has been said and come to some conclusion."

Given the facility's location on unincorporated county land, the city has no authority over Lehigh and cannot impose any operational conditions on the quarry or the cement plant. The city, however, does maintain an active interest in operations, particularly on the issue of resident health.

Resident complaints center around fears about the potential long-term health issues for residents who live close by. Residents felt that a letter or resolution from the council would carry more weight than anything from each individual resident.

"There is no excuse for politicians here not to take this seriously," resident Rod Sinks said. "My God, we are the community closest to this plant, we are the ones that stand to be most affected. If our city council is unwilling to take a stand on our behalf, then what are they doing? This is the most important health issue we can face."

The facility is already the subject of countless regulations by the likes of the Santa Clara County Planning Office, San Francisco Bay Water Board, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District and the Environmental Protection Agency. The Bay Area Air Quality Management District has consistently said that emissions from the plant fall well below levels considered unhealthy.

The council voted to write a letter to the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors stating that more than 50 residents spoke out at the meeting. The letter will encourage the county to look at upcoming Lehigh issues in a serious manner and hear the issues quickly. A Nov. 10 letter to residents by then-Mayor Kris Wang stating that the city cares about resident health will also be forwarded. Residents were also encouraged to speak with representatives who are within the jurisdiction of the cement facility.

A more strongly worded resolution by Councilman Barry Chang was presented, but the other council members did not feel comfortable with the proposal and did not see a cause for concern.

The meeting was often tense, with residents shouting out of turn and occasionally booing or applauding statements by the council. Mayor Gilbert Wong had to resort to having the council take a couple of five-minute breaks to calm the crowd.

It could be argued that 2010 was the year of Lehigh in Cupertino. Based in part on pressure from Chang, the city has agendized Lehigh discussion and study sessions pertaining to the cement facility on a handful of occasions throughout the year. The city has maintained a robust web page on its website, dedicated to Lehigh-

related materials and meeting videos.

The city held two lengthy study sessions to educate the public on how and why the facility is regulated. The month of November saw a flood of residents overtake open public comment and urge the council to take a more active role in Lehigh issues.

Some residents attending the Dec. 21 meeting did not expect much of a response from the city, but were pleased to be given a forum to voice their concerns.

"They are our most direct community leaders that we have elected and they are the people we can go to first for an intermediary to represent a large part of the population," resident Emily Kinner said. "The council needs to know that people are being affected and this seems to be our only forum to address our opinions."

The plant was constructed long before there was a Cupertino and before the area became suburban. It was built in 1939 to provide cement to build California's Shasta Dam. Mining on the site dates back to the 1880s.

The facility excavates limestone from an on-site quarry for use as a raw material in cement manufacturing. The plant is responsible for half the cement used in the Bay Area, according to Lehigh officials.

For more information and to view previous city study sessions about the Lehigh Southwest Cement plant, visit www.cupertino.org/lehigh.