

Probe but don't be distracted

Phil Strickland Temecula Californian, 7-21-10

OK, now what?

After Councilman Ron Roberts called for a grand jury investigation of the Local Agency Formation Commission's handling of Temecula's bid to annex about 5,000 acres at its southwest border ---- a portion of which Granite Construction wants to blast to blazes ---- that's the obvious question.

There's been grumbling all along about the handling of Temecula's request by the commission and the first crack may have opened in the rocklike edifice with the revelation of at least one meeting between the commission's then-chairman Russell Kitahara, Coachella Valley Water District director, and Granite point man Gary Johnson.

Such a meeting, if not illegal, is certainly of questionable judgment. Perhaps recognizing that to be the case, Kitahara told three quarry opponents just a couple weeks before the September 2009 hearing that he had "never" met with any Granite officials.

It has been pointed out that Councilwoman Maryann Edwards met with George Spiliotis, LAFCO's executive officer, at the Santa Margarita Ecological Reserve which comprises the majority of the land the city was seeking to acquire.

Edwards says she thought it would be helpful for the staff to see the substance of the application.

For petitioners, in this case that's the city, to meet with LAFCO staff is not unusual. In fact the process wouldn't work if they couldn't meet.

But staff doesn't vote. Commissioners do, so a trip to Coachella Valley by Granite's man to have breakfast with the commission's chairman is quite another matter.

It's especially curious when the chairman can't remember what they found to talk about after Johnson drove all the way out there to see him.

And Johnson didn't even invite Kitahara to see the proposed mine site.

In the end, one supposes one hole looks pretty much like another.

So, now what? Aside from whether and when the grand jury would investigate, we need to know what else is behind that wall waiting to seep from the just opened crack or perhaps even to create a new fissure.

Thus we turn our eyes to other members and wonder what's the tab for breakfast?

Remember, the state land-use commission predicted in its 2008 annual report that the quarry would be approved. Those state worker bees are so prescient.

They know.

In the meantime, as imperative as a LAFCO probe is, we must not be distracted from the process as it wends its

way to the Board of Supervisors for final action and the subsequent filing of lawsuit(s) by the losers.

When we go to court, we want to go as winners, not losers.