

There's still time to save the ridge

David Czamanske, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 7-19-10

Czamanske is vice chair of the Pasadena Group of the Sierra Club

As the clock approached midnight on July 6, four members of the Azusa City Council were explaining their reasons for approving Vulcan Materials Co.'s plan for mining the western 80 acres of its 270-acre Azusa Rock Quarry that will reduce the iconic Van Tassel Ridge overlooking the city of Duarte to a shell of its former self.

A few minutes later Mayor Joe Rocha expressed his sorrow that the ridge will be destroyed: "When it's gone, it's gone, forever."

With Rocha dissenting, the Azusa City Council approved both a new conditional use permit and a development agreement for the western expansion, bringing to a close the battle to save the ridge from destruction.

Or did it? Many residents of Azusa repeatedly testified at public hearings that they oppose Vulcan's plan and will continue to do so. Save Our Canyon, a citizens advocacy group based in Azusa that opposes mining expansion, has vowed to put a referendum on the ballot to overturn the decision.

Duarte residents are strongly opposed as well, fearing the 28 years of mining the ridge will, day by day, whittle down the scenic backdrop of their city, disturb their quietude with up to 60 days of dynamite blasting per year, spew potentially hazardous dust in their homes and yards, and sharply decrease their property values.

Those residents were instrumental in persuading the Duarte City Council to set aside \$700,000 to fight the expansion plan, and will likely be decisive in persuading their City Council to take every legal step, including litigating all procedural and substantial environmental issues, to defend the city against those undesirable outcomes.

Meanwhile it's instructive to look at the recent votes from the perspective of the Azusa City Council. Throughout the long approval process Vulcan had threatened to sue if its plan was not approved, claiming the city's 50-year permit issued in 1988 entitled it to mine anywhere on its 270-acre property, and that their proposed plan to mine Van Tassel Ridge on the west side of the property was the best way to minimize adverse impacts to the city of Azusa. Azusa council members and staff sought the best deal they could get. What they got was ample in many ways, but what they gave up was significant.

They got many of the objectives sought by the city: avoidance of mining Fish Ridge which overlooks the city's Mountain Cove community; improved revegetation on old and new mined slopes and significant mining fees that will fatten the city's treasury.

But they sacrificed Van Tassel Ridge to Vulcan's claim that mining the ridge is essential to a financially successful project that will enable it to implement a much-improved phased reclamation plan. Vulcan will reshape the old-style 40-foot high "Mayan steps" on which native vegetation can regenerate, and it will reclaim all future mined areas on the west side with micro-benches.

Sounds good. Until you read the language of the development agreement, which states that reclamation shall commence upon "granting to Vulcan all land entitlements necessary for Vulcan to excavate, mine, reclaim, and

develop the entirety" of the 270-acre site. Similar language qualifies several of Vulcan's other commitments, including its commitment to dedicate an acre of land and a trail easement along the east side of Fish Canyon.

Moreover, in response to Councilman Uriel Macias' request that the entire site be conveyed to the city of Azusa when the mining permit terminates in 2038, Vulcan states it will give the city the first right of refusal to purchase the eastern 80 acres of its property, but says nothing of its future plans for the remainder. Is Vulcan uncertain about its ability to market the quantity of aggregates it alleges it can mine and sell by 2038, and if so, is it preserving its options for appealing to a future City Council for a new permit to mine beyond that date?

Many observers say Azusa could have achieved a better outcome by insisting on the environmentally superior alternative mentioned in the project's Environmental Impact Report. This alternative, supported by Duarte, Save Our Canyon, and the Sierra Club, would preserve both Van Tassel and Fish ridges by limiting mining to areas within Fish Canyon already disturbed by previous mining.

Azusa's City Council has one last chance to remedy some of the most egregious deficiencies in the development agreement. Tonight, the Council will vote on the required second reading of the ordinance approving the development agreement. Let's hope they take another hard look at improving that agreement by limiting future mining to areas already mined, thereby preserving Van Tassel Ridge.