

Locals speak out on Petaluma-area quarry proposal

Brett Wilkison, Santa Rosa Press Democrat, 7-16-10

Supporters and opponents of a proposed rock quarry west of Petaluma once again packed a hearing of the Sonoma County Planning Commission Thursday, this time to weigh in on endangered species and greenhouse gases.

Commissioners voted 5-0 in April to recommend approval of the 65-acre project off Roblar Road, proposed seven years ago by North Bay Construction owner John Barella.

But that was before biologists reported their discovery of endangered California tiger salamander larvae on the project site and before local air quality regulators issued new rules on greenhouse gases.

Both issues will result in costly mitigation measures if the project is to proceed with a good environmental grade, county staff said Thursday.

Barella would have to pay up to \$80,000 per acre to replace salamander habitat damaged by mining operations, plus put up fencing around the quarry site to ward off the amphibians and hire an on-site biologist during each phase of the work, county staff said.

He would also have to use alternative, low-carbon fuels for equipment and pay to offset the nearly 6,000 metric tons of greenhouse gases — almost six times the legal cap — the project is expected to produce each year.

Barella said he was willing to do it all, telling commissioners and the audience that he hoped to win over his detractors.

“I know I’m making a lot of people unhappy,” he said of the controversial project, which is expected to produce about 11 million cubic yards, or \$60 million worth of construction-grade rock over at least 20 years if approved.

Barella said he planned to retain ownership and operation of the quarry despite the recent sale of his 34-year-old company to rival Ghilloti Construction Co. of Santa Rosa.

“I plan on being a responsible neighbor,” he said.

Quarry opponents, however, repeated their claims that public and environmental health will be in jeopardy if the project is given the go-ahead.

The site is next to a former landfill used in the 1950s, and later in the 1970s to dump building waste from the 1969 Santa Rosa earthquake.

Property neighbors said they fear the dump contains toxic materials such as lead and asbestos and that digging and blasting to extract gravel could stir toxins into the air and leech them into groundwater.

Some fought off earlier quarry proposals years ago on the same property by different owners. They said the same water quality, air quality and traffic concerns persist today.

Only comments related to greenhouse gases and salamanders were permitted Thursday, focusing opponents

attention on those issues:

“This particular property is significant upland habitat” for salamanders, said Susan Kirks, representing the Madrone Audubon Society. “An industrial operation like a quarry, regardless of the mitigations proposed, would completely decimate that habitat.”

Sebastopol activist Magick cited a report on the continued rise of local greenhouse gas emissions and said the county is failing to do its part in the climate change battle by approving projects with large air quality impacts.

Quarry supporters argued the opposite point — that Barella's project would reduce greenhouse gases by replacing imported rock, from outside Sonoma County and the country, with a local product.

“It just makes more sense to me,” said John Bly, executive vice president of the Northern California Engineering Contractors Association.

Chris Snyder, district representative of the Operating Engineers Local 3, said the project was also needed to support local construction jobs, which have dwindled in the recession. Barella says the quarry will create up to 10 full-time jobs and support hundreds of trucking positions.

“The economic part of this is real,” Snyder said.

Both camps wore either t-shirts or stickers advocating their side in the debate.

A short-handed Planning Commission — Commissioner Bob Williams was absent — asked few questions of staff and told the audience they would return in September for a hearing and final vote on the project's environmental impact report. No vote was taken Thursday.

The proposal then will go to the Board of Supervisors for consideration.