

Temecula's annexation, quarry price tag: \$644,000

Jeff Horseman, Riverside Press-Enterprise, 7-18-10

Temecula has spent \$644,000 so far on experts and documents related to its annexation attempts as well as a proposed quarry that City Council members have vowed to block.

Councilwoman Maryann Edwards on Friday said she didn't have a problem with the city's annexation- and quarry-related spending.

"When you consider the size and scope of the assets gained ... I don't think that's unreasonable," she said.

Planned for a 414-acre site in the foothills southwest of the city, the open-pit quarry would extract up to 5 million tons annually of aggregate -- tiny rocks used in construction -- for 75 years. Asphalt and concrete would also be made there.

Critics say Liberty Quarry will fill the air with hazardous dust, add truck traffic to local roads and harm the adjacent Santa Margarita Ecological Reserve. Quarry developer Granite Construction says its project will be a good neighbor and provide an economic boost.

While the council hasn't taken an official stance on the quarry, all five members have made it clear they are opposed.

In a Thursday interview, city Planning Chief Patrick Richardson said roughly half the \$644,000 stems from the city's annexation quest. Last summer, Temecula sought to annex the reserve and the quarry site and enact zoning to ban open-pit mining.

The Riverside Local Agency Formation Commission, which reviews annexations, rejected the city's proposal, saying the quarry's fate should be decided at the Riverside County level. An appeal failed in September.

COMMISSION DECISION

The other half of the \$644,000 is tied to the city's critique of a 6,800-page environmental report on the quarry.

The report, which is being reviewed by county planners, spawned 150 pages of comments by the city.

Paid for by Granite, the draft report concluded the quarry would have unavoidable environmental effects, but that traffic and pollution would still be a problem without a quarry, since gravel trucks would continue to drive through the area.

Both sides lobbied the commission outside the hearing room. Commissioner Russell Kitahara met several times, once for breakfast, with a Granite executive, and Edwards said she toured the reserved with commission Executive Director George Spiliotis.

None of the meetings broke commission rules. "It's not out of the ordinary for an applicant to meet with the people hearing the application," Edwards said.

City officials objected to the way last summer's 10-hour hearing was handled, especially when Kitahara cut City Manager Shawn Nelson's rebuttal short. Kitahara this week said the rebuttal was becoming repetitive.

Temecula on June 24 secured the commission's blessing to annex 4,510 acres of mostly undeveloped land. The quarry site was not part of the annexation.

The city's experience with the commission left council members feeling Temecula was treated unfairly, they said.

Created by state law, the commission consists of two county supervisors, four local elected officials from across the county and a private citizen.

In order to incorporate the land, most of which belongs to the ecological reserve, the city agreed to submit an application to the commission to take out part of the quarry site that's in the sphere of influence.

The sphere marks property that a city may one day annex. The quarry site has been part of the sphere since 1991.

'GUN TO MY HEAD'

Some city officials were surprised the commission asked for the sphere revisions. But Granite spokeswoman Karie Reuther noted her company informed the city of its desire to have the sphere redrawn months before the June 24 hearing.

Council members were blunt in their frustration with having to redraw the sphere. "I feel like someone put a gun to my head and wants to make me do something that I know is not fair and I know is not right," Councilman Chuck Washington said.

Councilman Mike Naggar called the ruling "bizarre." And Councilman Ron Roberts suggested the county grand jury investigate the commission.

"We need do something," he said. "We shouldn't put up with this."

'WE ARE IN A WAR'

Several residents urged the council to fight the commission. "This is the time to stand up for Temecula against (the commission's) abuse of the process or risk falling into the trap of a gravel pit company," Paul Jacobs said.

But Comerchero said the sphere would be redrawn regardless of what the city did.

"What's better, to let it happen and still annex some of the most valuable property in Southern California?" he asked. "Or let it happen and not have that valuable property in the city?"

Naggar said the city will create a master plan for trails and other public amenities in the newly annexed land.

"The future desire to put a quarry (next door) will become even more incompatible," he said.

Edwards said the city has "not given up our right to litigation when this is all over."

Added Comerchero: "It hasn't even started yet. We know that we are in a war and we are going to fight it to win it."