

# Temecula annexation gets green light

*But approval conditioned on removal of quarry from sphere of influence*

**Dave Downey, Escondido North County Times, 6-25-10**

The city of Temecula is set to grow 25 percent, encompassing 35 square miles, with Thursday's approval of an annexation of the Riverside County portion of Santa Margarita Ecological Reserve and a handful of rural residential properties.

But the 4,502-acre annexation approved 6-0 by the Local Agency Formation Commission doesn't include the site of the proposed quarry that Temecula officials earlier sought to bring into the city in order to control the fate of the controversial project.

For the annexation to move forward, the city must file another application within 90 days to pull 169 acres of the quarry site out of the city's so-called sphere of influence. A sphere is an area designated for possible future annexation, but such areas don't always become part of cities.

The subtraction wasn't part of Temecula's revised annexation proposal, but something that had been requested by Granite Construction Co. ---- the firm proposing to build and operate the sand-and-gravel mine.

The agency's staff recommended the commission not act on Granite's request, saying an analysis of the environmental impacts of such a change must be completed first. But Commissioner Robin Lowe, a Hemet councilwoman, said she wanted the quarry's removal from the sphere tied to the approval. Other commissioners also pressed for that requirement.

According to a report prepared by commission staff members, that area has been inside the sphere since Temecula's early days as a city.

In 1991, the commission adopted a sphere of influence that took in the line of steep hills west of the city, all the way south to the county line, for the purpose of giving Temecula some control over the scenic escarpment.

Referring to the portion of the quarry property that is within the sphere, the report stated that "these boulder-strewn hillsides provide a dramatic entrance into the city from the south."

Temecula Mayor Jeff Comerchero initially said Granite should pursue removal from the sphere of influence separately. But after seeing that commissioners wanted to tie the two issues together, the mayor said the city would offer to take the lead.

In response, commissioner Phil Williams of Lake Elsinore proposed waiving the \$4,600 fee the city would be charged to file the request.

Comerchero said after the meeting that the Temecula council will probably address the matter July 13.

Despite the condition, city officials saw the decision as a victory, given that the commission last year rejected its proposal to annex 5,000 acres, including the entire 414-acre quarry property.

George Spiliotis, the commission's executive officer, said by telephone later the annexation could go forward as

early as August. But first, he said, the agency must hold a protest hearing ---- essentially a meeting where letters of protest from affected landowners are reviewed.

For such letters to prevail and derail the annexation, they would have to represent properties that, combined, add up to more than half of the total assessed value of the annexation area.

According to the staff report, the San Diego State University-managed ecological reserve makes up 95 percent of the annexation land. And the university favors annexation.

However, Spiliotis said that, because the reserve is public property and off the tax rolls, the commission will have to determine how much the 4,284 acres of reserve land covered in the proposal is worth.

Matt Rahn, San Diego State's field programs director, said the reserve is known around the world as a premier research center for climate change, earthquakes and wildfires. And he said it is one of the few remaining places in the region where the environment is largely undisturbed.

Referring to the Santa Margarita, he said, "That is the last fully protected, free-flowing river left in Southern California." He mentioned that the reserve is home to a type of shrub ---- rainbow manzanita ---- found nowhere else in the world.

"It is unique. It is a one-of-a-kind, irreplaceable resource," Rahn said.

He told commissioners it would be beneficial for the reserve to be inside Temecula's boundaries because the city's police officers and firefighters can respond more quickly than county employees can to wildfires and vandalism calls.

"We've had a lot of damage to rocks and cultural sites along the river," Rahn said. "And our weather stations and towers tend to attract baseball bats."

Comerchero said the city stands to benefit from the relationship, too.

"It will become a source of pride for our residents that there is a world-class research center within our city," he said.

He dismissed a suggestion by a commissioner that patrolling the reserve would leave urbanized parts of the city unprotected. He said at times, calls on the reserve might pull police officers away from important calls elsewhere, but there should be plenty of manpower to handle the needs in the neighborhoods and business districts that compose the department's primary responsibility.

The city's contract with the Riverside County Sheriff's Department for police protection provides for 105 sworn officers.

At the outset of the meeting, two Boy Scouts went to the podium to urge approval.

Eric Smith, 13, of Temecula, said, "To us, just kids standing on the outside looking in, it just makes sense."

Once complete, the annexation would boost Temecula's size from 28 to 35 square miles, said city Planning Director Patrick Richardson.

But according to a commission report, it would increase the city's population by only 19, from the current estimate of 105,029.

The annexation area includes 225 acres of private property, where there are only a few scattered homes and the topography is so rugged that very little development, if any, is expected there, the report said.

Granite Construction officials attended the meeting but did not speak.

Later, by telephone, aggregate resource manager Gary Johnson said he viewed the sphere of influence removal as "a positive step that LAFCO recognized should be done. ... It's a cleanup item that is very appropriate."