

Azusa councilman would reconsider mining plan if changes made

Daniel Tedford, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 5-23-10

AZUSA -- Members of the Azusa City Council say they are willing to give a controversial mining plan a second chance.

After the City Council last week rejected Vulcan Materials Co.'s plan to permit rock mining on 80 acres near Duarte, council members said they might approve a proposal with tougher oversight.

Councilman Uriel Macias said options like more limited acreage, tougher environmental controls and more strict financial guarantees for hillside restoration could be considered.

"If both parties agree to do so, I would be willing to explore the options of looking into environmental and financial safeguards I didn't find in the use permit and development agreement," said Macias, who voted against approval last Tuesday.

"There was a lot of issues that were open-ended or very vague. I felt they needed to be ratcheted up, clarified, or actually just put into the agreements."

Mayor Joe Rocha and Councilman Robert Gonzales also voted against Vulcan's proposal. Councilmen Keith Hanks and Angel Carrillo voted in favor of the plan.

The council, however, approved an environmental impact report on the project - Macias voted in favor of the document.

An amended project has the possibility of still being considered under the EIR as long as the impacts would not increase, city officials said.

Leaders at Vulcan Materials Co. - who own the quarry - would like to work with Azusa to find a way to mine the area, according to spokesman Todd Priest.

"Vulcan Materials will continue to work with the city and the community as we move forward in evaluating a variety of options," Priest said.

Priest declined to elaborate on what those options might include.

Vulcan was seeking to exchange 80 acres of land permitted for mining on the most eastern end of its property for 80 untouched acres the company owns on the western end, which isn't permitted for mining.

The company owns 270 acres, but has a permit to mine only 190 acres.

The plan has caused a feud between Azusa and Duarte, touching off threats of boycotts and talk of lawsuits.

When pitching the company's plan, Vulcan officials promised to use a new technique to restore the hillside following mining. The technique, which Vulcan calls "microbenching," would use one- to two-foot benches rather than more commonly used 30- to 50-foot benches found at most hillside mining sites.

Vulcan will continue to use the larger benches, known as "Mayan steps," if it continues work under the 1988 agreement for the eastern 80 acres and the rest of the 190 acres for which the company has a permit.

Much like Mayor Rocha did at Tuesday's vote, Macias criticized the 40-percent revegetation benchmark for restoring mined hillsides.

"The benchmarks should certainly be a lot higher than 40 percent," Macias said. "If it is not attainable, they should tell us why."

Vulcan officials said they would like to explain how they came up with the 40-percent figure.

"The issue regarding revegetation standards needs to be better clarified and explained to the City Council," Priest said. "It is important to clarify that the revegetation requirements are absolutely consistent with the density levels currently found in the San Gabriel Valley mountains."

The benchmarks were set by experts and botanists to ensure vegetation would blend with the surrounding hillsides, Priest said.

Council members and members of the community also would like Vulcan to avoid mining ridgelines.

"The ridge is a focal point because tearing down ridges is not reversible," said Richard Deem, member of Azusa-based anti-mining group Save Our Canyon. "There is a number of organizations that are unhappy about tearing down the ridge - Sierra Club, Duarte. It removes the last unmitigatable aspect of the EIR. Don't tear down the ridge, that part is fixed."

While Duarte city officials have been critical of Vulcan's proposed plan, they have said they would support efforts to compromise.

"Trying to deal with the visual impacts of this thing is a huge concern for our city," Duarte Councilman John Fasana said. "We need to see what ultimately (Vulcan) would come up with. There are things we can be helpful... if they are interested."