

Cupertino council votes to install air monitor near Lehigh Cement plan

Matt Wilson, Bay Area News Group, 5-20-10

A recent surge in public pressure from residents regarding the air quality in neighborhoods around the Lehigh Southwest Cement Plant has prompted the city to let the Bay Area Air Quality Management District set up an air monitoring station about two miles from the facility.

The city council unanimously voted May 18 to let the air district set up a station in the parking lot at Monta Vista Park, 22601 Voss Ave. The station will operate for a minimum of one year.

BAAQMD will supply and operate the monitoring device.

City Manager David Knapp said Monta Vista Park is the preferred choice as it is the closest piece of city-owned land near the facility. Knapp told the Courier in March that more information will be good for the public. Any monitoring can help calm resident fears or reveal unknown air quality issues that need further investigation by BAAQMD, he said.

On April 29, the city and BAAQMD held a neighborhood meeting to chat with residents about the proposed station. About 40 people attended and voiced support for the plan.

The air district is the lead public agency entrusted with regulating stationary sources of air pollution in the nine counties that make up the San Francisco Bay Area. The Lehigh facility is the only cement plant in the agency's jurisdiction. Since the cement and quarry facilities are outside the city's borders, monitoring air is one of the few direct things Cupertino city leaders can do to address resident concerns over air quality.

Typical air monitoring devices by BAAQMD normally are installed directly at the cement facility. This will be a remote device measuring ambient air.

Eric Stevenson, an air-monitoring manager with BAAQMD told the Courier in March that this makes it difficult to determine the exact origin of any potential pollutants. The readings represent what a neighborhood is exposed to, but not where the pollutants are coming from.

The device will still be able to look for elevated levels of pollutants like carbon monoxide, methane, oxides of nitrogen, non-methane organic carbon ozone and sulfur dioxide. These levels will be reported in real-time to BAAQMD's website. The station will also gather samples of metals, gasses and particulate matter, which will be analyzed in a laboratory every four months.

However, any data pulled will have to account for known spikes in activity at the recreation center, including increased car traffic at the park, grass mowing and dirt kicked up from the park's baseball field.

The station will be enclosed in an 11-foot by 24-foot trailer and will house a 30-foot meteorological tower, which will measure wind direction and speed to assist BAAQMD in determining the source of pollutants.

Similar mobile stations have been used in Benicia and Berkeley, according to Cupertino city staff.

The cement plant has become an increasingly popular issue of concern among a regular group of residents the past six months. Resident Cathy Helgerson, a frequent Lehigh critic, spoke at the council meeting and insisted that the city and BAQQMD work with more agencies to ensure timely and accurate data.

"I'm very concerned that the EPA is not involved. The fact of the matter is we need a clear picture of how things are calculated and we don't want to wait a whole year for this monitoring. We need to be notified as time goes on," she said. "This testing is very crucial and it's never been done before and we need to make sure that it is done right. The city needs to make sure that it's done right."