

County planners OK use permit for mine

Tiffany Revelle, Ukiah Daily Journal, 5-21-10

Granite Construction Company's proposal to mine north of the former Masonite property on industrial land got the approval of the Mendocino County Planning Commission Thursday morning after about two hours of debate.

The commission certified an environmental impact report and approved a use permit for the project, allowing Granite to extract 2.25 million cubic yards of rock over about 25 years.

The three-phase project encompasses about 30 acres located about two miles north of Ukiah, at the confluence of Ackerman Creek and the Russian River.

"We really need aggregates to run our business," Granite Resource Development Manager Jordan Main said.

He said the company's two terrace mines on Talmage Road and Redemeyer Road were dwindling when the company bought the acreage north of the Masonite site in 2002, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Mendocino County Water Agency made it clear that extracting material for gravel from Russian River streams wasn't an option.

Currently, Granite imports rock from a site on Highway 175 in neighboring Lake County, according to Main, and the company wants to have a local source for the round rock it uses to make concrete.

"These exist where they exist; we don't have a choice where good quality aggregate is found," Main said.

Paul Wisniewski of SCS Engineers - a firm hired by Masonite - argued Granite hadn't looked hard enough.

The former Masonite property borders the project on the south. Wisniewski and Tim Smith, an attorney speaking on behalf of Masonite, spoke against the project, saying the mining operation would "destroy prime agricultural land" and threaten the water supply from wells on the Masonite land.

Commissioner Karen Calvert noted the land was zoned industrial, and Mendocino County Planner John Speka explained the Department of Conservation said it was prime agricultural land because of its high-quality soil types.

Smith argued the EIR was inadequate, and Granite would be allowed to "dig holes deep into the ground adjacent to the Russian River, Ackerman Creek and properties with potable water wells, and allow those holes to remain as long into the future as any of us can see."

Asked by Commissioner Greg Nelson how the mining would threaten the water supply from the wells, Smith deferred to Wisniewski.

Asked the same question, Wisniewski said, "water quality, primarily."

"In what way?" Nelson asked.

"Well, that the water quality in that well would be impacted in a negative way such that we'd have to either

relocate the well or abandon it," Wisniewski said.

"As in, sediment, or minerals, or toxic substances or --"

"Any and all of the above, because of the close proximity," Wisniewski said.

"OK, so you don't have anything specific," Nelson said.

"Well, those are the specifics," Wisniewski said.

Nelson noted fish farming is a major industry in California, and while he didn't know if that was planned for the pond proposed for the mining operation, "agriculture converts all the time."

Commissioner Jim Little asked Wisniewski if Masonite had hired SCS Engineering to prepare an environmental analysis of a "commercial and residential development on the adjacent parcels," referring to an 800,000 square-foot mall and subdivision the Ohio firm Developers Diversified Realty unsuccessfully pitched to voters as an initiative on the November ballot to rezone the land.

Wisniewski said he didn't think that issue was relevant, although he had noted earlier the former Masonite land wasn't vacant, as planning staff noted in the report, but "in various stages of development."

Little said it was relevant, "because apparently they have concerns about this project, but they had no concerns about the development on their own property, which many people in this community felt would have a significant impact."

Wisniewski said, "You can always demo the shopping center and convert it to something else, even ag, but once you do this, you can't do anything."

"I don't buy it, but good argument," Little said.

DDR Vice President of Development for the Western Region Stanley Hoffman attended the discussion, but did not speak. He refused to comment about DDR's interest in Granite's mining proposal north of its land holdings.

Supporters of the mining operation, including the North Coast Builders Exchange, the Mendocino County Department of Transportation and at least six individual speakers argued it would bring jobs to the area and keep spending local.