

Proposed quarry raises concerns

Opponents say it could expose residents to contamination, toxins

Philip Riley, Petaluma Argus-Courier, 5-7-10

A proposed rock quarry in north Petaluma is causing concern and outrage among citizens who say that it will have negative impacts on the entire county.

The proposed quarry site is on Roblar Road, on rural land that is outside Petaluma city limits and about four miles directly east of Cotati. Opponents of the Roblar quarry say it will expose nearby residents and possibly others to contaminated groundwater and airborne toxins. Supporters say that potential environmental problems are manageable, and that a local source of rock material is needed for road improvements — and the resulting jobs — planned in the county in the near future. The proposal is tentatively set to go before the Board of Supervisors on Aug. 10.

The application for the quarry was filed in 2003 by North Bay Construction, a Petaluma company owned by John Barella. Estimates indicate that the quarry would produce \$60 million worth of rock over 20 years. According to the county, the site is unusually rich in construction-grade rocks that are needed for planned road improvements, including the Highway 101 widening. More quarries are inevitable for the county's growth, and rock quarries are encouraged over more destructive forms of mining, including terrace pits, said county representatives.

“Terrace pits create more environmental damage than hard rock quarry operations,” said Blake Hillegas, a planner with the county's Permit and Resource Management Department. Terrace mines are dug horizontally in stages, and are more invasive than shallower quarries.

“We've lost two quarries here in the south county,” said Barella, citing the Dutra quarry and the Sonoma rock quarry. Barella said that having a local source of aggregate will prevent the environmental and monetary costs of shipping rock in from British Columbia.

“It will save money to the taxpayers,” Barella said of the plan. “Greenhouse gases are a big issue.”

But opponents say that the county has overlooked certain environmental impacts of the quarry and has downplayed the importance of other impacts.

The quarry site sits next to a former landfill that was used for dumping in the 1950s and later closed by the county. The landfill is unlined and opponents worry that blasting and digging at the mining site could expose toxins into the air and the groundwater supply.

“We don't feel that the county has adequately tested the landfill to see what kind of toxins are in there,” said Donna Spilman, a member of the community group Citizens Against Roblar Rock Quarry. “The main concern for those that live nearby is the water quality.”

Spilman also said that the rock may contain asbestos and silica particles that can be released with blasting and carried in the wind throughout the valley. She and others point to the problems that have been created by toxins at mining sites in San Rafael and other areas.

Spilman said that the quarry is a countywide issue because of the pollutants that could spread and because of the use of Agricultural and Open Space District funds on the project.

The Open Space District is a county agency that purchases and preserves rural land. It was established in 1990 when voters approved a quarter-cent sales tax to fund the program. Part of the quarry's proposed site includes land bought by the Open Space District in 2004.

The proposal calls for trucks to use four acres of the land for transportation to and from the site. In exchange for the use of the Open Space District-protected land, North Bay Construction has agreed to give 130 acres of its nearby land to the Open Space District and more donate acreage at the mining site when mining operations are done in around 20 years.

“Our tax dollars were used to fund this when the county knew they were trying to put a quarry there,” said Spilman. “They're giving him (Barella) funds to build a quarry using my tax dollars.”

Hillegas said that it would be a “temporary road only isolating 4 acres.”

The county also added a condition of approval to the project that would require North Bay Construction to purchase insurance to relieve the county of risk if the groundwater becomes contaminated. This requirement is part of about 160 conditions of approval that the package will have when it comes before the Board of Supervisors.

“They are telling the public the quarry operation will be safe, but their actions requiring the indemnification (insurance) say otherwise,” said Spilman.

Recently, North Bay Construction's biologist found larvae of the “threatened” California Tiger Salamander species on the site, which will require more environmental review, said Hillegas.

While the county recognizes that there may be potential problems with the project, it believes that certain risks are “unavoidable” and that mitigations have been put in place to try to address them, including groundwater and air quality monitoring and more.

The county's planning department on April 1 recommended approval of the project and approved a list of benefits that they feel “override” the impacts on land use, water and air quality, and traffic. Those benefits include the need for a local source of rock for road improvements, job creation and other economic benefits.

“We're mitigating all the ones we can mitigate,” said Barella. “We're trying to do the right thing.”

With the finding of the salamanders on the site, the project will be opened again for public comment this summer before likely going to the Board of Supervisors in August, said Hillegas.