

# Los Altos council digs into quarry controversy: Plant officials continue to defend operations

**Elliott Burr, Los Altos Town Crier, 11-18-10**

Los Altos Hills resident Bill Almon, a vocal critic of emissions from nearby Lehigh Permanente Southwest Cement Plant in Cupertino, received support for his cause from the Los Altos City Council last week.

Councilmembers unanimously voted to send a letter to the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors expressing concern over the facility's emissions and requesting information on steps the county has taken to monitor them. The Los Altos Hills City Council is scheduled to discuss sending a similar letter at its meeting Thursday.

"I'm interested in preserving the health and well-being of our community," Los Altos Mayor David Casas said. "It's prudent for our residents, given the potential impact, that we clearly understand the consequences" of excessive emissions.

Casas is scheduled to address the board of supervisors on the matter Tuesday at a public hearing. Quarry officials plan to apply for a 25-year operating permit with Santa Clara County that would allow expanded mining operations in coming months.

The facility provides more than 50 percent of the cement used in the Bay Area, according to Lehigh estimates. Almon is working to curtail the expansion with QuarryNo, a group he founded in 2008 to rally against Lehigh and urge the county to deny the plant the permit.

He has alleged that most of the quarry's mercury, benzene and arsenic emissions – some of which naturally occur in the limestone used to make cement – blow over Los Altos in the wind. "The threat is very significant," Almon said at a presentation to the council Nov. 10. Data Almon obtained in August and confirmed by quarry officials states that the plant emitted 582 pounds of mercury in 2008, making it at the time the nation's fourth highest mercury-polluting cement plant, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

The facility currently emits 337 pounds of mercury per year, according to Lehigh officials, a reduction that complies with updated EPA regulations. "The real deadly (chemicals) like arsenic, lead, mercury, benzene and chromium 6 are in minute quantities, so they are not observable," Almon said in an interview after the presentation. "You don't smell them, there is no plume. ... It is only much later, after they have affected your body, that you are aware of their impact." Almon, on behalf of QuarryNo, which has grown to include 500 members, has secured legal representation to present the position that the quarry violates California's Proposition 65, requiring public notification of harmful emissions beyond specified levels.

Almon also said the facility has operated without an Environmental Impact Report. Lehigh hired AMEC Geomatrix to perform a Health Risk Assessment, which concluded in September that "based on current operating conditions at the facility, potential human health risks for cancer endpoints were below levels requiring notification."

Councilman Ron Packard, a lawyer by profession, said he's willing to authorize "hundreds of thousands" of dollars in legal fees to ensure the quarry's compliance with regulations. "I don't like to hinder business and industry. It's the backbone of our country," Packard said. "I want to support it, but they have to be responsible."

Quarry representatives said they were not notified of Almon's presentation last week. "While I first learned about the Los Altos City Council agenda item after the fact, we would have gladly participated," said Henrik Wesseling, plant manager. "Lehigh Permanente is always happy to meet with our neighbors and elected officials to answer questions and share information about our operations." Shyamali Singhal, surgical oncologist at El Camino Hospital in Mountain View, spoke at the meeting, claiming the quarry's emissions data

don't take into account "synergistic toxicity," a concept in which chemicals are more harmful and behave differently when compounded. "One in two people in their lifetime is going to get cancer," Singhal said. "We need more information about synergistic toxicity from the quarry."