

Los Altos jumps into quarry debate

Diana Samuels, Bay Area News Group, 11-10-10

The Los Altos City Council decided Tuesday to dig into a county debate over the future of a local quarry and cement plant that has been accused of pumping toxins into the air.

The council voted unanimously to send a letter to county officials expressing its concerns about the Lehigh Southwest Cement Company site in unincorporated Santa Clara County, just south of Los Altos.

"I'm not interested in rattling sabers," Mayor David Casas said, "but I am interested in preserving the health of our community."

Bill Almon, founder of the "Quarry No" group, said the county is considering an application from Lehigh to dig a new pit and obtain a permit for 20 years of use. He gave a presentation to the council at a study session Tuesday and urged members to take a stand against the quarry. Its operations emit mercury and carbon dioxide, as well as arsenic, benzene and chromium 6 toxins, which affect Los Altos residents, Almon alleged.

"These toxins are silent," he said. "You can't smell them. You won't see them. They're not in the smoke."

Another speaker pointed to instances where Lehigh was cited for not following air quality guidelines. The Environmental Protection Agency issued a notice to the company in the spring for allegedly violating the Clean Air Act.

"Why should we think that granting them the ability to do this for another 20 years, that all of the sudden they're going to start abiding by the guidelines?" one woman asked the council.

No representatives from Lehigh were present at the city council meeting. In June, company officials announced they had installed equipment to reduce mercury emissions by 25 percent.

The council decided to outline its concerns in a letter to the county, urging officials to complete an environmental impact report for any quarry expansion before considering approval.

Los Altos also plans to submit formal requests for information about the quarry to the various governmental agencies involved, including Santa Clara County and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District. Council members said they may ask City Attorney Jolie Houston to focus on the quarry as a "special project."

Mayor Pro Tem Ron Packard said he is willing to see the city spend "hundreds of thousands of dollars in attorney's fees" to make sure regulations applying to the quarry are enforced.

"It's impacting our community significantly, and because of that, it's our community that's probably going to have to take the step," he said. "The county is getting a huge financial benefit from allowing this operation to continue, by way of property taxes."