

Azusa Rock Quarry referendum passes first test, has enough signatures to qualify for ballot

Daniel Tedford, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 10-4-10

AZUSA - Voters will likely get the chance to vote on an Azusa Rock Quarry mining project after a referendum garnered enough signatures to qualify it for the ballot.

Azusans Against Mining Expansion gathered 2,638 signatures to put the Azusa Rock Quarry's development agreement to a vote of the people. The county found 2,088 signatures valid, which is 400 more signatures than were needed to have qualified the referendum.

The mining plan in question was approved by the council in July.

"We worked hard and it was something in the community we needed," said Paul Naccachian, the group's leader and a former council candidate. "It is going to be a lot of education to let the public know the underlying truth behind what has happened."

The council now has the choice to accept the referendum, qualifying it for a citywide election, or revote on the issue and repeal the development agreement themselves, officials said.

"It sure opens up a lot of interesting doors," said Mayor Joe Rocha, who was the lone dissenting vote when the project was approved.

Azusa City Manager Fran Delach said city staff, who recommended approval of the project, won't play a major role in opposing the referendum.

"I know we are not going to change our position. I think once the citizens or residents know what the facts are, I believe they will support the council and the staff's position," Delach said.

The referendum, if it goes to a ballot, would do so during a scheduled election or in a special election, which could be determined as soon as the council's Oct. 18 meeting, officials said.

The Azusa City Council in July approved an amended mining permit allowing Vulcan Materials Co. to move mining operations at its 270-acre Azusa Rock Quarry.

Vulcan has a permit from Azusa to mine 190 acres of its property near Fish Canyon. With the council's approval, Vulcan will be able to mine 80 acres on the western part of its property instead of 80 acres on the east.

Vulcan officials said they believe residents will side with their project in a vote.

"We believe ... that as voters have learned about the benefits of the project, they understand ... why the council approved it by a 4-1 vote," Vulcan spokeswoman Peg Casey said. "I do think there is going to be a lot of communication, discussion throughout the community and that is all good and we are excited about that."

Officials with Azusans Against Mining Expansion hope that voting down Vulcan Materials Co.'s mining plan development agreement will nullify the entire project approval, forcing the city and Vulcan to operate under its previous mining plan.

City and Vulcan officials contend a referendum will only repeal the development agreement and city benefits listed within while the mining plan itself will be allowed to carry on.

"We actually believe the city attorney's opinion is extremely compelling and we are not sure why any Azusa resident would want to take the risk of nullifying many of the benefits included in the development agreement," Casey said.

The development agreement for the plan ensures millions in revenue for the city in the form of tax payments for open space and city benefits, as well as a one-time \$75,000 scholarship payment.

Despite benefits outlined by Vulcan and city staff, including additional revenue, Naccachian said it is the mining's impact to views and health that is at the forefront of residents' minds.

"The environmental impact is the ultimate issue the City Council is not listening to," he said.

Naccachian said his group has no preference between a special election and putting the referendum on the March election ballot.

"Based on the number of signatures we gathered and overwhelming support of community regarding this and disappointment with the City Council, I think there is enough energy out there to get them to vote," he said.

Himself a former council candidate, Naccachian said he hasn't decided if he intends to again run for City Council.