

Sacramento County's first hard-rock quarry mining project nears OK

Robert Lewis, Sacramento Bee, 10-28-10

The first hard-rock quarry mining project in Sacramento County history overcame a key regulatory hurdle on Wednesday and is weeks away from likely approval.

The Sacramento County Board of Supervisors accepted the final environmental impact report for a Teichert Aggregates proposal to begin hard-rock mining on 380 acres of land on the east side of Scott Road just south of White Rock Road in the unincorporated Cosumnes area. The board also voted to amend the general plan to allow mining on the property.

For decades, mining companies have dug into old riverbeds and sifted through the dirt for usable rock – a process called alluvial mining. Those old river deposits are nearly exhausted, however, and the county is now looking at quarry mining – a process in which miners blast and drill into solid rock.

The Teichert project, first proposed in 2002 and amended in 2006, is one of three major hard-rock quarry mining projects in the works. Angelo G. Tsakopoulos and the owners of Barton Ranch are also looking to mine their land, county officials said. The Teichert project is the first project to submit a final environmental impact report.

Wednesday's board action doesn't actually mean Teichert can start mining the land, which is zoned for animal grazing. Instead the board is scheduled to come back Nov. 30 and pass the final resolutions necessary for such approval – including a rezoning of the land, a use permit and a signed development agreement between the county and Teichert.

With the county planning department's support, however, such approval appears imminent.

The project is necessary to provide aggregate material, the crushed rock that goes into asphalt, concrete building foundations, bridges and other construction projects, county officials said. The mines in the east county are five to 10 years from being mined out.

"We're running out. You have to have a local supply," said Jeff Gamel, a senior planner with the county.

The development agreement that Teichert and county officials are still finalizing includes several measures that could appease environmental groups.

The tentative agreement calls for Teichert to pay a per-ton fee for projects that primarily benefit the American River Parkway. The money would likely go directly to either a newly created foundation or possibly to an existing nonprofit, like the American River Parkway Foundation, said Cindy Storelli, a senior planner with the county.

One project that has already been discussed is a multipurpose trail to connect the American River Parkway with Deer Creek Hills. Such a trail would require additional planning and approval.

Teichert has also said it will give the county \$200,000 a year for two years to fund extra park rangers on the parkway. The money should pay for two more rangers each year, county officials said.

The project has caused concern for neighboring cities Folsom and Rancho Cordova, where officials worry in particular about increased truck traffic.

County officials are still working out transportation routes with Teichert, and such details should be included in the development pact that supervisors discuss Nov. 30.

As for environmental concerns, county officials say the project calls for regular monitoring of groundwater and the company has a number of processes to control hazards.

When up and running, the mine could extract a maximum of 7 million tons of hard rock a year – 135 million tons over the 25-year life of the mine, county records show. If the other two mining projects are approved and begin operating, the maximum output for all three would be 19 million tons a year. That's far more than the 9 million tons a year that county mines currently produce.

The output, however, will depend on demand, said Storelli, a senior planner. County staffers are guessing the maximum output will be closer to 13 million tons a year.

The demand for such aggregate is down now with the construction industry still sluggish in the wake of the recession. The mining projects, however, will likely still take three to five years after approval to begin producing aggregate. That's because of the extensive permitting and infrastructure development, officials said. That means it's important to keep the projects moving.

"They really need to be ahead of the market and ready to go," Storelli said.

John Taylor, Teichert's land use attorney, said the project will provide the area with an important building material for the next 25 years.

"Without this project, one of the critical components for economic development will be missing," Taylor said.