

Smaller quarry called precedent

But critics of company opening larger site say it's unfair comparison

Jeff Horseman, Riverside Press-Enterprise, 10-22-10

As the fight over the proposed 414-acre Liberty Quarry just outside Temecula rages on, a 92-acre version of the open-pit mine has just started crushing rock.

Rosemary's Mountain Quarry is 10 miles south of the Liberty site. The developer of both mines, Granite Construction, is holding up Rosemary's as proof that Liberty, planned for the hills south of Temecula, will blend in seamlessly with southwest Riverside County.

To that end, the Watsonville-based corporation is also hosting an open house from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday at the quarry, 5606 Pala Road in the San Diego County community of Fallbrook.

The proposed quarry elicits strong reactions in Temecula, where all five City Council members oppose the project. Many of Liberty's opponents view their struggle as a showdown between an out-of-town, wealthy corporation and everyday residents.

Quarry critics say Liberty, which will dig a pit as deep as 1,020 feet, will fill lungs with microscopic dust particles and roads with diesel-spewing trucks. They contend the quarry will ruin a neighboring ecological reserve, sever a wildlife corridor, hog water supplies and possibly trigger an earthquake through rock blasting.

Granite officials say critics' claims are outrageous and misleading. Instead of harming the environment, the quarry will improve air quality by reducing Interstate 15 truck trips and controlling dust emissions, Granite officials contend. Company representatives maintain the quarry will provide high-paying jobs and millions of dollars in tax revenue.

Liberty opponents say it's too early to know what Rosemary's effect will be on its surroundings and that Liberty would be a much bigger mine. They also question why Granite wants a larger mine when Rosemary's isn't in full production.

"One quarry this close is enough," said Judy Miller, who lives about a mile from Rosemary's.

Granite executives say Liberty and Rosemary's are needed sources of aggregate, a building material consisting of tiny rocks. An economist said demand for aggregate in Southern California should double in the next decade as construction picks up.

Sensors monitor dust, noise and vibrations from the quarry. So far, sensor readings don't show any problems, according to a Granite website.

It took more than 20 years to get Rosemary's approved, and Granite faces a similar battle to build Liberty. A final environmental report is pending. The Riverside County Board of Supervisors will ultimately decide whether Liberty -- first proposed in 2005 -- can be built.

CHECKING THE AIR

Rosemary's is on 92 acres off Route 76, about 1.3 miles east of Interstate 15.

The quarry itself takes up only 28 acres of the hillside property. Work on the quarry started in February 2008.

Granite eventually expects to mine 22 million tons of aggregate at the quarry over 20 years. Besides aggregate, the quarry will produce asphalt and riprap, or rock used to bolster shorelines.

The effort to mine Rosemary's Mountain goes back to the late 1980s. Granite took over the project and shepherded it through multiple approvals and court challenges.

Hundreds of homes are within a few miles of Rosemary's. When residents expressed concerns about air pollution, Granite formed an air-quality monitoring group of concerned citizens, who picked a firm to monitor microscopic dust levels around the quarry.

To date, none of the readings downwind of the quarry has exceeded state standards, said Paul Schafer of SCS Tracer Environmental of San Marcos. While Granite pays for the monitoring, the company has no control over SCS' work, said Gary Nolan, the Granite manager in charge of Rosemary's.

Noise and vibrations also are monitored, Nolan said. The results are posted on a Granite website and discussed in Granite-organized community meetings.

A WORKING MODEL

Gary Johnson, Granite aggregate resource development manager, said Rosemary's offers a model for how Liberty would operate. Compared to Rosemary's, Liberty will have fewer people living nearby and a location that's more concealed and closer to I-15, Johnson said.

It's too early to say what effect Rosemary's will have on residents, said Jim Russell, chairman of the Fallbrook Community Planning Group, an elected body that advises San Diego County on land-use matters.

"They're going to do the best they can," he said. "It's still a dirty business."

Miller and Jim Oenning, a Liberty critic who belongs to the air-quality monitoring group, praised the air-monitoring efforts at Rosemary's. But they said Liberty is the wrong project in the wrong location.

While Rosemary's is in a valley, Liberty would be higher, where winds blow constantly, increasing the potential for hazardous dust to reach populated areas, Oenning said. He noted that Liberty, which would mine 5 million tons of aggregate annually, is much larger than Rosemary's and would have a 75-year lifespan instead of 20.

2nd QUARRY NEEDED?

Oenning and Jerri Arganda, a leader in the anti-quarry group Save Our Southwest Hills, also question why Liberty is needed given the lack of demand for aggregate.

They said Liberty faces stiff competition from companies seeking to ship aggregate from Canada to Southern California ports. One company, Vancouver-based Polaris Minerals, signed a lease this summer to use a Long Beach port terminal for aggregate deliveries.

Johnson said that compared to importing aggregate from ships, aggregate from local sources costs less and results in fewer air emissions.

David Chereb, an economist in Mission Viejo who analyzes aggregate trends, said demand in Riverside County has fallen flat. But demand in Riverside and San Diego counties likely will double in the next 10 years as the economy recovers, he said.

Johnson of Granite said even if Liberty and Rosemary's operated at full tilt at the same time, they would satisfy only 50 percent of the aggregate demand within a 30-mile radius.

Rosemary's is kind of an interim quarry until Liberty comes online, Nolan said. "By the time Liberty gets up and running, this place will be depleted."

PROBLEMS ELSEWHERE

While Granite insists Liberty won't harm southwest Riverside County, its practices elsewhere haven't always been celebrated.

In 2007, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality fined Granite \$240,000 for repeatedly discharging sediment into a river and its tributaries while realigning a highway. In an e-mail, Granite spokeswoman Karie Reuther wrote that Granite invested \$192,000 in stream enhancement projects following the fine.

"The construction challenges were addressed immediately, and Granite has subsequently exhibited sound environmental performance on this project," she wrote.

Granite also faces a lawsuit from San Diego that accuses it of falsifying records and over-billing for cleanup after the 2007 wildfires. Published reports indicated the U.S. Justice Department was looking into the matter, but a department spokesman said he could not confirm or deny an investigation was ongoing.

In her e-mail, Reuther wrote: "Granite remains confident that these allegations have no legal or factual merit. Granite will continue the rigorous defense of its position."

Despite Granite's troubles in areas beyond aggregate production, Johnson said Nolan has shown Rosemary's -- and one day Liberty -- can be run responsibly.

"If people come down and see this operation and get involved, they find out it's really not as bad as some of the extremists would have you believe," Johnson said.