

County report recommends approval of Liberty Quarry

Jeff Horseman, Riverside Press-Enterprise, 4-16-11

Riverside County planners are recommending approval of an open-pit mine that critics say will ruin the Temecula Valley and surrounding areas.

Liberty Quarry "would bring many benefits to the county, the region, and the community surrounding the site," stated a report released Friday that was written for the county Planning Commission. The panel will review plans for the project at two upcoming public hearings.

"The Planning Department has determined that the possible impacts that may result from the project are outweighed by the benefits the project will bring to the county; as such, Staff is recommending approval of the project," the report read.

Karie Reuther, a spokeswoman for quarry developer Granite Construction, praised the report, saying it offers further proof of the quarry's benefits.

In an email, Jerri Arganda, a member of the anti-quarry group Save Our Southwest Hills, said the report "will have little importance in the scheme of things."

"What will make the difference are the people that are going to show up at the meeting (on) April 26. Goliath will fall."

The report accompanies the agenda for the commission's April 26 meeting, scheduled for 4 p.m. at Rancho Community Church, 31300 Rancho Community Way, Temecula. Thousands are expected to attend. A second hearing is set for 4 p.m. May 3, also at the church.

The report suggests the commission approve a smaller version of the quarry deemed to be environmentally friendlier by a massive study of the project. The downscaled quarry's footprint would be 135 acres instead of 155.

The commission is being asked to approve a surface mining permit and noise ordinance exception for the quarry and to recommend that the Board of Supervisors change the zoning at the 414-acre quarry site. Supervisors will have the final say on the project.

Workers at the quarry would make concrete and asphalt and use explosives to blast away millions of tons of tiny rocks known as aggregate, a common building material. The mine sought for land in the foothills between Temecula and San Diego County would operate for 75 years and give way to a man-made reservoir.

Granite and its supporters say the quarry planned for a site just off Interstate 15 would provide about 100 high-paying jobs, millions of dollars annually in tax revenue and a desperately needed local aggregate source. They say the quarry will improve air quality by taking diesel-spewing trucks off the road.

Critics, including the Temecula City Council, argue that the quarry would add truck trips and fill the air with harmful, microscopic dust particles.

Noise and light pollution from quarry operations would be rampant, and the project would spoil a neighboring

ecological reserve and sever a path to the ocean for wildlife, opponents say. Others insist any economic benefits from the quarry would not make up for the quarry's damage to local tourism.

In their report, county officials review the findings of a 6,800-page environmental impact study, attacked by critics as poorly researched, pro-quarry propaganda.

Paid for by Granite and vetted by planning staff, the study found the quarry would have "significant and unavoidable" effects on air quality and traffic, but not building the quarry would also lead to congestion and air pollution, since trucks would continue to travel long distances to haul aggregate.

The report to the commission noted that, of the 232 who commented on the study, 11 supported the quarry or took a neutral stance.

Despite the opposition, planners found that the project is "consistent with all zoning standards."

The report noted the regional aggregate shortage and that the quarry would create jobs. Also, the quarry would not be visible from populated areas, its site is close to the freeway and the number of truck trips would drop, the report found.

Commissioners are not bound by the planners' recommendations.