

Doctors concerned about proposed quarry's health risks

More than 100 have signed petition in opposition

Aaron Claverie, Escondido North County Times, 4-20-11

Four doctors representing a coalition of 146 physicians opposed to Granite Construction's Liberty Quarry held a press conference Wednesday in Temecula, saying the county's environmental report failed to thoroughly study the health risks associated with the project.

"It's a medical nightmare," said Phillip Tafoya, a doctor who was joined at the conference by three colleagues: Temecula pediatricians Daniel Robbins and Natasha Rodgers and retired physician Reginald Watts.

Of particular concern for the doctors is the "needle-shaped" silica that will be generated by the quarry ---- sharp microscopic shards created by blasting and crushing operations. They also spoke about the possibility of lung and heart issues associated with an increase in pollution.

The doctors' announcement follows the release of a county-commissioned environmental analysis that concludes that the quarry activity would not create significant health risks and would actually improve air quality because of reduced truck traffic through Southwest County.

Granite, a Northern California-based company, has proposed operating the open-pit mine within a 400-acre property that sits between the San Diego County border with Riverside County and Temecula's southern border. At full capacity, the 135-acre quarry is expected to generate 5 million tons of aggregate rock at the site, which is just east of the Santa Margarita Ecological Reserve.

According to Granite's projections, about 70 percent of the aggregate generated at Liberty Quarry would be headed south to meet construction needs in San Diego County.

On Tuesday in Temecula, the Riverside County Planning Commission will conduct the first of two scheduled hearings on the quarry. The project has been hotly debated in Southwest County, as well as Fallbrook and Rainbow in San Diego County, because of concerns that include the negative effects it could have on air quality, traffic, the migratory paths of animals and other environmental issues.

The quarry is supported by people who point to the jobs it will produce and the tax revenue it will generate.

The county, in its final report on the project, determined that the dust and silica kicked up by the quarry activity would not exceed the air quality standards put in place by the state to protect public health.

The county also said the project is "environmentally superior" to not digging a quarry, in part, because of the air quality benefits from reduced truck traffic on the stretch of Interstate 15 that runs through Temecula Valley.

The county's environmental documentation contends that, if Granite's projections are accurate, the quarry will eliminate millions of miles of truck travel on Riverside County roads because developers in San Diego County will no longer buy aggregate from quarries in the Corona area and other points north.

Questioning report

Robbins said he and his colleagues have serious concerns about the validity and breadth of the data being used

by the county, and the collective doubts of more than 140 doctors should give the county pause before it signs off on the project.

The coalition, which calls itself Physicians Against the Quarry, has forwarded a letter addressing its concerns and signed by all 146 doctors to the county planning commissioners as well as to the county Board of Supervisors.

"If there is any doubt about air quality, that should be enough for the supervisors," Robbins said, adding that any increase in pollution will have the strongest effect on the most vulnerable members of the community: the elderly and children.

The county board will rule on the quarry proposal after the Planning Commission hearings.

Talking about the pollution that will be generated by the quarry ---- a mix that includes exhaust from trucks and machinery, dust and silica ---- the doctors at the conference said residents exposed to that combo will find their health deteriorate.

"But (they) won't know why," Robbins said.

After the conference, Tafoya elaborated on the slow-developing nature of the health risks, saying it might take 20 or 30 years to see how the community has been affected by the additional materials in the air.

New conditions

In the county's final environmental report on the quarry, conditions were added that would require Granite to establish an air monitoring program and report that information quarterly. The company also would be ordered to suspend all blasting, excavating and grading when wind gusts exceed 25 mph.

Robbins said that requirement is very important, and he said it's an acknowledgement by the county that there is a danger of strong winds carrying dust and particulates into residential areas.

But Robbins said the air monitoring program doesn't have any teeth because it doesn't require Granite to shut down if pollution levels exceed the state standards. Also, he said it will be easy for Granite to game the program by not scheduling its most intensive activities for monitoring days.

In response to Robbins' claims, Granite spokeswoman Karie Reuther said that if the monitoring indicated a problem, the county and the South Coast Air Quality Management District would require changes to the operations be made immediately.

As for the possibility of gaming the program, she said Granite won't know or be able to choose what days monitoring will take place.

Kleinfelder Inc., the environmental firm that worked on the air quality analysis used in the county's environmental report, has determined that even in the "worst case" scenario, none of the quarry's air quality effects will exceed health thresholds.

"Air emissions from developments such as a mall, a discount store and a home improvement store are much greater than the net emissions from the Liberty Quarry project," according to a Kleinfelder report.

Granite answers critics

Quarry critics have dismissed Kleinfelder's findings because its report was commissioned by Granite ---- as per county rules that require companies to pay for studies associated with their projects.

Reuther said the studies were done according to Environmental Protection Agency and AQMD standards, and they have been cross-checked by a host of consulting firms.

The findings, she said, show that the emissions from the quarry, at the project boundary, would be 214 times lower than what the state and the EPA call safe standards for crystalline silica.

Reuther also said that the quarry, as noted by the Planning Department, would improve local air quality by removing pollution-belching trucks from the freeway.

"That's why reducing the truck traffic is such a positive," she said.

Addressing the risk of silicosis, a respiratory disease caused by breathing in silica dust, Granite has pointed to research by Patrick Hessel, a Canadian doctor who has written numerous papers on silicosis, that states, "There will be no risk of silicosis for people living in the area of the proposed quarry."

As for the other health issues mentioned Wednesday by the doctors' group ---- asthma, heart disease, reduced lung function ---- Reuther said there is no report that links health problems in residential communities with the operation of quarries.

"They're not basing this on anything but their opinion," she said.