

Opponents unswayed by Liberty Quarry data, studies

County responds to questions prompted by those concerns

Aaron Claverie, Temecula Californian, 4-4-11

The stacks of technical studies and reports on air quality and traffic. The information released by Granite Construction and the environmental documentation published by the county.

The "thumbs up" from some economists and conservative leaders.

They're all meaningless to opponents of Granite's Liberty Quarry project, and later this month, leaders of the opposition groups say they plan to air their concerns about the project at the first of two scheduled county Planning Commission hearings on the proposed open-pit mine.

"I don't believe them," said Temecula resident Marelle Dorsey, talking about the county's report stating that air quality in Southwest County will improve if Granite is allowed to dig the quarry because pollution-emitting trucks will be reduced on the region's freeways. "(Granite) came up with this story so their polluting numbers work."

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

On April 26, the county commission will conduct the first of two scheduled hearings on the project ---- hotly debated in Southwest County as well as Fallbrook and Rainbow, because of concerns that include the negative effects it could have on air quality, traffic, the migratory paths of animals and other environmental issues.

To boost turnout for the first hearing, opposition groups recently unveiled on the western edge of Interstate 15 a billboard urging people to attend.

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

The county has determined that the project is "environmentally superior" to not digging a quarry, in part, because of the air quality benefits from reduced truck traffic.

Dorsey contends that those benefits are a mirage, the product of a traffic study and assumptions that don't withstand serious scrutiny or common sense.

"The whole thing is built on a house of cards," she said.

Truck traffic

Granite has said that about 70 percent of the aggregate produced at Liberty Quarry will be trucked to San Diego County.

When developers tap that resource ---- the material used in building roads and many other projects ---- they will no longer be buying aggregate from quarries in the Corona area.

The study, commissioned as part of the county's review of the project, says the shift from those northern quarries to Liberty will remove millions of truck-trip miles from the roads annually.

"What if it's not true?" asked Dorsey, a real estate professional who said she has thoroughly vetted the county's environmental report.

If Granite doesn't send the majority of the aggregate south, she said, the truck-traffic miles and the air quality estimates no longer will be accurate.

In response to that question, the county's Planning Department said in a written statement: "Granite's target market is the Temecula-Murrieta area, southwestern Riverside County, and northern San Diego County. The (environmental report) provides an accurate and thorough assessment of the potential impacts related to the project serving this market.

"However, we have no control over market forces and we cannot analyze, and are not legally required to analyze, or in some cases control, every conceivable project permutation."

Lower demand?

Granite has said it is putting the quarry in that location because of the anticipated demand for aggregate in San Diego County.

Even though demand has fallen in recent years because of the economy, Granite project manager Gary Johnson said it's only a temporary dip.

"It will come back," he said, adding that the studies detailing the need for the aggregate included in the county report were conservative estimates that did not take into account the huge uptick during the building boom ahead of the recession.

As to the questions about the age of the studies on truck traffic and aggregate demand, the county said its report satisfies state requirements.

Those requirements state that an environmental analysis on a project must be based on nearby physical environmental conditions as they exist at the time the public is notified that the analysis is going to be prepared.

Some of the studies included in the Liberty Quarry report were completed before the issuance of the public notice in summer 2007, but the county said the report is consistent with the state's rules.

"Some of the other studies that were completed in earlier years ... present data collected at that time as well as reasonable projections of those data into the future," according to the county.

Regarding the traffic studies, the county took counts obtained in 2006 and added a growth rate of 2 percent annually up to the year the project is expected to be in full production.

Asked whether that growth rate skewed the counts in light of the dip in demand for aggregate, county spokesman Ray Smith responded in an email to The Californian:

"The data is not skewed. The consultants applied the required growth rate to analyze the project's potential impacts as originally proposed. That is standard practice. Current traffic numbers might be lower than during

the studies (for the draft environmental impact report), but the approach taken ... would thus represent a more conservative analysis, i.e. the effects in the short term would be less than in the projections.

"The current economic downturn and related drop in aggregate demand is believed to be transient and does not reflect the demand for aggregate over the long run. Studies have shown that, over time, aggregate demand will grow along with population increase. Hence, the numbers are expected to pick up as the economy picks up."