

Black Butte gravel removal case grinds on; business owner, county in talks

Dylan Darling, Redding Record Searchlight, 2-5-11

More than three years after Siskiyou County planners first warned a Mount Shasta man that he could face fines if he didn't stop his gravel operation on Black Butte, the issue grinds on.

Keith Darrah, owner of Truck Village, was set to go before the Siskiyou County Board of Supervisors late last month but the board put off the hearing for a fourth time. The hearing originally was set for August last year but the board moved it to September, then December and then January.

Postponed again, the hearing is now set for April 7, said Siskiyou County Supervisor Michael Kobseff, whose district includes Mount Shasta. The mountain town is close to Black Butte.

The hearing is to review Darrah's appeal of the Siskiyou County Planning Board's June order to stop removing gravel from Black Butte until he obtained proper permits. It's possible that the hearing won't happen though.

Thomas Guarino, the county's attorney, said he's in negotiations with Darrah's attorney in an effort to resolve the issue.

"It's like parties getting together to settle a lawsuit," Guarino said.

Unlike the hearing, he said the public wouldn't be involved in the discussion.

"Any ultimate agreements will be public (though)," Guarino said.

Kobseff was tight-lipped about Darrah's gravel operation, saying he didn't want to say anything that would cause him to disqualify himself from the potential hearing.

Asked if Darrah was still scraping gravel from the cinder cone, a fixture along Interstate 5 about an hour's drive north of Redding, Kobseff said "not to my knowledge."

Darrah didn't return a message left at his business this week.

Terry Barber — director of Siskiyou County Public Health & Community Development, which oversees the Planning Division — responded to requests for a telephone interview Friday with an e-mail.

"I can tell you that the county continues to work toward resolving this case," she wrote.

She didn't respond to a voice mail and e-mail Friday asking about why the case was moving into its fourth year.

Darrah owns a truck dealership at the base of Black Butte, known for its colorful collection of dump trucks and water haulers visible from the freeway.

Neighbors complain that he expanded occasional gravel production for the truck lot into a dusty, noisy rock crushing business over the last decade.

While the county and Darrah postponed coming to a conclusion, Darrah hasn't been crushing rock recently, said Ron Servia, 60, who lives close to truck village. Each time the board put a Truck Village hearing on the calendar, Servia planned to attend. Now he waits, either for the county's decision or the hearing in April.

Throughout the wait, Servia's opinion about Darrah and the rock crushing hasn't shifted.

"I don't ever want to see him operate," Servia said.

Servia isn't the only one watching the county and Darrah. In 2007 state mining officials warned Siskiyou County that if it didn't do something about Truck Village they would. They continue to wait for the county to act, said Don Drysdale, spokesman for the state Department of Conservation.

"In this case it's taken a long time and that's unfortunate," Drysdale said.

If it isn't resolved in the meetings between the county and Darrah the state will take another look at it, he said.

The state hasn't stepped in because there is not an immediate danger to nearby properties.

"It's just a guy who seems to be operating outside of the mining law," Drysdale said.