

Large Jamestown-area rock quarry proposed

Walt Cook, Sonora Union Democrat, 2-4-11

The Tuolumne County Planning Commission, after a four-hour hearing Wednesday, delayed action on a proposed open-pit mine near the Stanislaus County line.

Environmentalists, landowners and public officials, arguing that the operation's impacts need a closer look, had urged the move.

Commissioners continued the meeting until Feb. 16, to give the county planning staff time to address the concerns expressed by project critics.

Proposed by Jack and Tricia Gardella and by Resource Exploration and Drilling on 135 acres south of Knights Ferry, the Cooperstown Quarry would require zone changes and permits. The Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors will make the final decision, after considering the commission's recommendation.

Wednesday night's meeting was marked by concerns over trees, roads and the long trains that would serve the operation. The session even drew officials from Oakdale and Stanislaus County who had issues with the proposal.

The vocal critics overshadowed a brief presentation by developers.

The Cooperstown Quarry would produce 56 million tons of rock by the end of the century. Annual production is slated to range from 600,000 to 1.5 million tons, according to project plans.

Front-end loaders would scoop up rock and put it in crushers, and Sierra Railroad trains would haul it off.

Up to 33 times a year explosives would be used to loosen up the rock and make it easier to extract.

The quarry's finished product would be aggregate material that could be put to a number of uses, including road base and plaster sand. The operation would employ at least 45 people and work around-the-clock.

The mine site is nine miles south of Knight's Ferry off Cooperstown Road.

More than 500,000 cubic yards of topsoil, which would be stripped from the site to reveal the rock, will be used to reclaim the mine, according to plans. Reclamation would take place in phases as the mine progresses.

Ken Williams, a consultant who wrote the reclamation plan for developers, pointed out that the law allows reclamation to take place any time. But due to bonding requirements, he said, it's cheaper for mining companies to conduct reclamation work regularly rather than putting it off.

His response came after some planning commissioners expressed concern that an open pit — like that at the Jamestown Mine — could be left behind if the mine is ever abandoned.

"I get a little nervous," said Commissioner Jerry Morrow.

Critics at Wednesday's meeting worried that not enough would be done to address the project's environmental and social impacts. Of particular concern was the county Community Development Department's

recommendation that the project receive a “negative declaration.”

Projects that earn that designation are determined to have limited environmental impacts due to mitigation measures that developers agree to. One hundred conditions have been tacked onto the plan and are part of the negative declaration.

Without a negative declaration, projects are subject to a the more thorough — and more expensive — environmental impact report.

Oakdale City Councilman Mike Brennan characterized the difference between a negative declaration and an EIR like this: A negative declaration is much easier to push through — unless the public raises concerns.

Brennan’s primary beef with the quarry has to do with rail traffic. He raised concerns that trains would lead to congestion at gate crossings in Oakdale as they make their way to and from the site. According to plans, trains will vary from 30 to 90 cars in length.

“If they (the Sierra Railroad) do not handle this properly, we’ll have citizens of Oakdale complaining,” Brennan said. “Oakdale is the main arterial for trains to pass through.”

A handful of others in the audience, including Stanislaus County residents who own land near the mine site — expressed similar concerns. They also worried about noise, derailments and falling property values.

Stanislaus County Public Works Director Matt Machado questioned impacts to Cooperstown Road, an unpaved route that will be used to access the mine site. Even though a tentative agreement requiring the mining company to help improve the road was in an addendum to the proposed plans, Machado said he couldn’t fully support the project until his concerns were addressed.

Rebecca Cremeen, of the Twain Harte-based Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center, was skeptical about developers’ plans to replace slow-growing blue oaks at a one-to-one ratio with seedlings. Ten-to-one is the standard ratio, she said.

Following the many outspoken critics, the mining project planners said they’d be willing to take another look at their plans.

“Many concerns have merit; many have been resolved,” said project planner Bruce Baracco. “But we’ll take another look.”

“We believe it’s not going to change things out there that much,” landowner Tricia Gardella told commissioners.