

New business eyes Davenport land as Cemex, county continue talks

Kimberly White, Santa Cruz Sentinel, 2-23-11

DAVENPORT — The small North Coast community of Davenport has been quieter and cleaner during the last year, its buildings and air no longer suffused with the fine, gray particulate matter once emitted by the now-shuttered Cemex plant.

“Because of the pollution it put out and the toxic dust, the westerly winds always blew it across town, and you could see it in the air, you could smell it, you could taste it,” said Steve Rudzinski, who works as assistant director at the Davenport Gallery.

But what the community also is missing is the financial support the cement manufacturer when the plant was operating. The assistance came in the form of subsidies to offset water and sewage bills for residents and business owners, and \$15,000 in annual funding for Pacific Elementary School’s music program, which also has disappeared like the proverbial dust in the wind.

The plant, which opened in 1906, was temporarily closed in early 2009, and the closure became permanent in January 2010 due to the faltering economy and reduced demand for cement. A potential buyer, JoeBen Bivert, a Bonny Doon engineer and inventor who’s expressed interest in purchasing the land to build a wind-turbine plant, has scheduled a community meeting to discuss potential plans for the site, and how those plans would impact the community, for the end of March.

Meanwhile, the loss of 120 jobs at the plant has been a bitter pill to swallow in this town of about 350 residents.

Noel Garin Bock, who chairs the nine-member community group Davenport North Coast Association, said that of the 120 employees who were laid off, only about a dozen actually lived in Davenport. But the handful of businesses in town — such as the Whale City Bakery Bar & Grill, Arro’s Country Store and the Davenport Roadhouse — have lost business from the plant workers who no longer shop and dine there.

But the greatest impact can be seen in the community’s sewer and water bills, which Cemex once helped offset. Cemex once footed about half of residents’ total bills, and since the plant’s closed, those bills have increased significantly. In May, county officials speculated residential sewer bills would rise roughly 74 percent, and water bills by 10 percent. Residents protested, and the rates still rose, but only by about 38 percent.

For example, Bock’s water bill rose from \$1,346 last year to \$1,479 this year, and her sewage bill rose from \$1,430 to \$2,037 — a hike of \$740 total. Meanwhile, Pacific School’s bill rose in one year by 58 percent, from \$7,846 in fiscal year 2009-10 to \$12,440 this year.

“Cemex has been entwined in our sewer and water for years, and the community has been beholden to them all this time,” Bock said.

Supervisor Neal Coonerty said county officials have met with Cemex representatives twice in the last year — with a third meeting scheduled for the end of this month — to discuss their intertwined relationship. Cemex officials remained tight-lipped about those talks, saying in a prepared statement, “We are exploring viable alternatives for the site. We have been and will continue to communicate with the county on our progress.”

But according to Coonerty, the two sides have not only discussed details related to the clean-up of the site and

restoration of the limestone quarry — both of which the county will oversee — but also how to maintain any lease agreements. Cemex owns approximately 8,000 acres of land, a portion of which is home to Davenport's sanitary operations, as well as the town's volunteer fire department. In addition, because Davenport is the highest point along the coast, the Sheriff's Office and California Highway Patrol have communications equipment atop Cemex's towers.

“If the land changes hands to a new owner, officials want to make sure the agreements between the county and Cemex aren't dismantled,” Coonerty said.

Cemex is also no longer maintaining the town's water intake system, and residents and county officials also want to ensure they'll still have access to that land.

Meanwhile, any change in ownership of the property will be complicated at best, bringing in a host of issues that include maintaining those lease agreements, possible zoning changes based how the new owner plans to use the land, and, ultimately, obtaining permission for any changes from the California Coastal Commission.

“It really depends who would want it and what they would want it for, and whether they would tear down the old buildings or reuse the existing buildings,” Coonerty said. “To change the zoning would probably take three years, if not more, and that's a total public process with community hearings.”

He said officials may look at an interim use of the land until something more concrete is developed. Next month, Coonerty will attend a meeting — the details of which are still being worked out — among Davenport residents, county officials and Bivert to discuss the engineer's ideas for the land.

Meanwhile, Bock said she's excited at the idea of a local business with strong connections to the community setting up shop there, and that Davenport residents would prefer to work with a local entrepreneur rather than a big, national corporation.

“I think to have an alternative business that is clean, this is an ideal location for that kind of light industry that would impact the community in a positive fashion,” she said.