

Azusa residents approve Vulcan mining plan by 2-to-1 margin in special election

Daniel Tedford, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 1-25-11

AZUSA - Residents here overwhelmingly voted in support of a new mining plan during a special election Tuesday.

The margin was more than 2-to-1, with 1,972 voting for Measure A and only 945 opposing it. Turnout was low; only 17.3 percent of registered voters (2,917 of 16,864) went to the polls.

The election marked a major victory for Vulcan Materials Co.'s Azusa Rock Quarry mining plan, its supporters and the four City Council members who had approved it last July.

"It is a great victory, not only for Azusa but for the entire San Gabriel Valley," said Elizabeth Ramirez, president of pro-mining group the Canyon City Alliance.

"We have always been ... committed to working with the community and these election results are an example of what can be accomplished when a community works together," Vulcan spokeswoman Peg Casey said. "Clearly, the voters have spoken."

Azusans Against Mining Expansion leader Jeri Vogel said her small group of residents just couldn't compete with a giant corporation.

"We were outgunned 88-to-1 in dollars," Vogel said. "With a small group of individuals, I think we did pretty good. They had all the people they could possibly pay to get the word out and we just had us."

The only thing standing in the way of the mining plan now is a lawsuit filed by neighboring Duarte. A hearing is scheduled for next month to put the legal proceedings in motion, Casey said.

"We are hoping for a quick resolution to the legal challenges that are filed against the city of Azusa," she said.

Tuesday's special election was the result of a successful referendum by the project's opponents, who started gathering signatures on petitions after the City Council approved Vulcan's plan 4-1 in July. Mayor Joe Rocha was the lone dissenting vote.

Vulcan Materials Co. has a permit to mine 190 acres near Fish Canyon on 270 acres the company owns. The City Council- and now voter-approved permit allows Vulcan to exchange 80 acres of mining land on the east end of its property for 80 acres of undisturbed land on its western end.

As part of the deal, Vulcan will pay Azusa additional taxes and will use a new technique it has termed "micro-benching" to contour the mountain side to look more natural after mining.

By comparison, the previous mining plan called for 30- to 50-foot benches known as "Mayan steps" that can be seen on the property from earlier mining.

Opponents have questioned Vulcan's ability to follow through on its promises.

"I am going to sit around and wait for the next two years and if those steps are not reclaimed or they look (bad), I am going to be up here and I am going to let people know," said Vogel, holding back tears. "And when the people find out they have been lied to, I hope they back me up."

Resident Bruce Scott said he voted in favor of the plan because he supported mining and didn't fear any unforeseen environmental impacts.

"I am for continued mining," Scott said. "It brings revenue to the city. It makes no sense to limit that now. I live nearby and if there were any concerns with dust or noise, it would bother us and it doesn't."

Aric Rodriguez, 33, said he voted against the plan because he wanted better access to hiking trails.

"Unfortunately, I have never made it to Fish Canyon because of the mining operation," he said.

Rodriguez questioned Vulcan's motives to move its operation to the west side of its property while giving various financial benefits to the city.

"I view it as, there has got to be a reason why they want to expand, otherwise they wouldn't be giving this stuff away to Azusa," Rodriguez said. "We don't need to lose another mountain ridge around here."