

County leaders get quarry hearing moved to Temecula

Riverside Convention Center was announced as the site earlier this week

Aaron Claverie, Temecula Californian, 1-22-11

The venue for the highly anticipated hearing on Granite Construction's Liberty Quarry project is moving south.

Riverside County Supervisor Jeff Stone said Friday that the meeting will be conducted at Rancho Community Church on Temecula Parkway.

"My feeling is we need to always make it as convenient as possible for our constituents," Stone said during a telephone interview.

Earlier in the week, the county's Planning Department announced that the hearing would be conducted April 27 and, in a posting on the department's website, listed the site as the Riverside Convention Center. That location was selected, in part, because the crowd for the hearing is expected to exceed the capacity of the County Administrative Center.

During a hearing staged by the county's Local Agency Formation Commission in the summer of 2009, more than 500 people showed up to the center to weigh in on the city's application to add 5,000 acres of land on its southwestern border, a swath that included the proposed site of the quarry. That application was eventually denied, but a follow-up application ---- 4,500 acres that did not include the quarry site ---- was later approved.

On Friday, which saw county offices dark because of budget considerations, the website still listed the convention center as the site for the meeting.

Ray Smith, a spokesman for the county, confirmed Saturday that the venue for the meeting had been changed.

Shortly after the convention center was announced as the location for the hearing, Stone and Supervisor Bob Buster started working behind the scenes to get the venue shifted to Temecula.

"I don't think people in downtown Riverside are going to care about what transpires in Southwest County," Stone said, adding that the vast majority of the people who are interested in the project live in the Temecula-Murrieta-French Valley area.

Dave Stahovich, Buster's chief of staff, said it makes sense on a number of levels to bring the hearing to Temecula.

"Whether they are for or against it, why add all those cars to the road?" he asked, referring to the hundreds of people expected to attend the meeting.

The quarry, proposed for 400 acres near the community of Rainbow on the city of Temecula's southern border, has been a flashpoint for debate for years.

Opponents claim it will affect air quality in the area, drive down property values and cause a host of other environmental ills. Supporters contend it will bring high-paying jobs to the area and improve the environment

by removing pollution-emitting trucks from the stretch of Interstate 15 that runs through Murrieta and Temecula.

Temecula Mayor Ron Roberts said he supports the move south, provided the venue has all the necessary audiovisual equipment.

"It would be great for the people in Temecula," he said.

Temecula City Manager Shawn Nelson said the city never received a formal request to use a city facility for the hearing, but he said he definitely thinks the council would support having the hearing conducted locally.

He added that when the city was working to annex the quarry site, it made a similar request to move the Local Agency Formation Commission hearing on that application to Temecula.

The hearing was eventually held in the County Administrative Center and, due to the large crowd, some residents of Temecula and De Luz who had driven north to offer testimony had to stand in the lobby and wait for a seat to open up. Those who didn't want to wait turned around and left.

Granite spokeswoman Karie Reuther said Thursday that it was her understanding, based on what Granite officials had been told earlier in the week, that there wasn't a venue with enough seating in Temecula.

Asked if Granite has a preference as to where the hearing is conducted, she said, "Wherever the county wants to have it, we're fine with."

If the hearing, scheduled to start at 4 p.m., is not wrapped up on April 27, the commission is scheduled to reconvene May 4 to complete the proceedings.