

Cemex bill gets buried again

Jonathan Randles, Santa Clarita Signal, 1-2-11

The sixth attempt to kill a proposed giant gravel mine north of Canyon Country died a quiet death last week when the 111th Congress adjourned without passing legislation sponsored by Howard “Buck” McKeon, R-Santa Clarita.

The bill aimed at terminating Cemex’s mining contracts in Soledad Canyon appeared to have the best chance yet, since it enjoyed bipartisan support from lawmakers and was bolstered by city officials’ lobbying trips to Washington, D.C.

Despite the fact that a bill was not passed, city officials said an agreement is closer than in years past.

McKeon, who could not be reached for comment last week, and U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., have told Santa Clarita officials they plan to introduce similar legislation when the next congressional session convenes Wednesday, according to Michael Murphy, the city’s intergovernmental relations officer.

“They’re both committed to moving forward, as is the city, to get this done next year,” Murphy said Friday. “I’m confident that we would get the legislation enacted in 2011. In essence, we just ran out of time.”

The fight between Santa Clarita and Cemex began in 1990 after the Bureau of Land Management awarded the Mexico-based cement company two 10-year mining contracts to extract 56 million tons of sand and gravel from Soledad Canyon.

The latest legislation was stymied by mining interests in San Bernardino and an earmark moratorium enacted by the Republican Party in early 2010, Murphy said. Earmarks are spending provisions that direct federal funds to projects that would benefit a Congress member’s district.

Under the proposed legislation, the Bureau of Land Management would have sold three parcels of land in Victorville and used the proceeds to pay Cemex the value of its canceled mining contracts.

Companies that own mines near that Victorville land were concerned that the parcels could have been sold to residential developers and impede their mining operations, Murphy said.

Leaders within the House Committee on Natural Resources, where the proposal originated, didn’t support the legislation because of the earmark moratorium, Murphy said.

Lawmakers are still working on a solution to ease the San Bernardino County mining companies’ concerns, he said.

“None of these issues are insurmountable,” Murphy said.

City Councilman Bob Kellar said he has been on more than a dozen lobbying trips to Washington, D.C., in the last five years to get a Cemex bill passed.

“I’m an eternal optimist. But, absolutely, it’s frustrating we didn’t get this done,” Kellar said. “I’m confident that 2011 will be the year we get this resolved.”