

Cooperstown Quarry project deserves approval

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To say the least, the proposed Cooperstown Quarry is an unusual project.

It's big: The 135-acre west county open-pit operation would by the end of the century turn out 56 million tons of rock in a 24/7 operation that will include blasting, heavy equipment and Sierra Railroad trains to haul out the aggregate.

Yet Jack and Tricia Gardella's project enjoys almost universal support in Tuolumne County. It has been endorsed by the Chamber of Commerce, the Economic Development Authority, the County Business Council, the Me-Wuk Tribe, the Building Industry Association and the County Planning Commission.

Yes, the Twain Harte-based Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center has concerns about air pollution and the project's effects on wildlife habitat, but urged preparation of an environmental impact report rather than outright rejection of the quarry.

So where sings the usual NIMBY chorus? The strident, anywhere-but-here naysayers that have protested so many of the Mother Lode's larger projects?

The answer is that the future Cooperstown Quarry hardly has neighbors. Cooperstown was once a Stanislaus County town, but no longer exists. Cooperstown Road exists, but barely. Even finding the quarry site, at the far western edge of Tuolumne County, is not easy.

A more remote, isolated site where this project would have fewer impacts, in fact, would be hard to find.

Curiously, the only significant opposition has come from beyond our border: Stanislaus County and the communities of Oakdale and Riverbank are the Cooperstown project's principal foes — mostly because of the traffic jams that could be caused by quarry trains rumbling across their streets and roads.

They have urged preparation of a full EIR, which could cost the developers about \$200,000 and set the project back a full year or more. Riverbank has even threatened a lawsuit.

We don't believe that is necessary. Given the limited scale of our neighbors' concerns, we would hope that permit amendments and additional conditions could resolve the remaining issues.

The Cooperstown Quarry would employ 45 workers and create additional, ancillary jobs with the Oakdale-based Sierra Railroad and other contractors. It would turn out rock valued for road base and rail ballast. Amid a still struggling economy, it is a welcome sign of life and deserves approval.

The project has already undergone exhaustive review by the Tuolumne County Community Development Department. Since its application was filed in August of 2008, said lead planner Adam Paszkowski, county staff members have put in nearly 450 hours on the project — most in an exhaustive environmental review that covered issues ranging from air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions to vernal pools and the effects of blasting noise on cattle.

Recommended are more than 100 project conditions, all designed to ease project impacts.

“We’re confident we’ve met the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act,” said Community Development Director Bev Shane.

At the same time, Shane hopes the remaining problems can be resolved before the Board of Supervisors resumes its deliberations on April 5. She was to meet this week with a “working group” including project, railroad, Oakdale and Riverbank representatives.

Although preparing an EIR is certainly preferable to rejecting the project, we hope that a spirit of accommodation and cooperation prevails and the Cooperstown Quarry can move forward.

It is a project in the right place at the right time.