

Mine Project Battle Galvanizes Cities

Richard Paloma, Oakdale Leader, 3-24-11

City officials from Riverbank and Oakdale joined forces to battle with the Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors at its Tuesday, March 15 meeting. At issue — a hearing on an open-pit rock mine bordering Stanislaus County off Cooperstown Road that would increase rail traffic through both cities.

The crusade to Sonora consisted of both mayors, elected officials, and city staff members taking the Riverbank Oakdale Transit Authority trolley up Highway 108 to the foothill city for the 1:30 p.m. meeting. While en route for the clash, the passengers strategized over legal documents and made notes for planned addresses to the Tuolumne board.

The Tuolumne Board Chambers were filled to capacity with additional concerned opponents of the development as well as proponents, consisting mostly of the mine project managers and railroad representatives.

The concern that many project opponents voiced is that only a “Negative Declaration” was prepared for the plan rather than a more in-depth Environmental Impact Report (EIR), which would have weighed the impacts of the project on other areas. Tuolumne officials claim they satisfied requirements for this type of project with the Negative Declaration.

Tuolumne County Community Development Director Beverly Shane made a presentation to the board outlining the details of the proposed 135-acre mine and its 45 to 75-year estimated operation. Sierra Northern, the freight operator of Sierra Railroad Company, will carry the mined crushed rock in 60 to 90-car-length trains twice a day from the Cooperstown mine site through Oakdale to Riverbank, where it will be transferred.

Shane added that the mine expected to have 45 employees for its 24-hour operation. The planning commission modified the mine’s proposal to operate only from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m.

When the agenda item was opened for public comment, Supervisor John Gray announced that the board had received separate requests from the city attorneys of Oakdale and Riverbank requesting that the hearing be continued at a later date.

“We’re all here, let’s do it,” said Supervisor Dick Bland.

“There’s plenty of people here now,” added Gray. “There was plenty of notice.”

A poll of the audience by the board showed over 25 people wished to address them about the topic.

“This is a good project and a well designed project,” said Bruce Baracco, the project planner for the mine’s applicants, property owners Jack and Tricia Gardella and mine operator Resource Exploration Drilling.

Baracco explained that he felt the project was a “green project” and the best technology would be used with significant reduced emissions.

Others that worked on the project planning preparation said that Cooperstown Road from Stanislaus County would not see any noticeable traffic increase and no sensitive species would be affected by the mine.

Mike Hart of Sierra Railroad said the project was “extremely attractive” to them. He noted that the mined rock is in short supply and is frequently used as ballast for railroad tracks. He also said he was in favor of a committee of the railroad and interested stakeholders with Oakdale and Riverbank to remain “good neighbors.”

Those speaking against the project outnumbered those in favor by roughly three to one.

Oakdale Community Planning Director Danelle Stylos and Fire Chief Mike Botto addressed the board regarding the need for an impact study of the mine for the city of Oakdale. There were noise worries and concerns for traffic delays due to rail crossings and the effect of emergency responses by the delays.

“This is a 75-year project,” said Botto. “We need to implement these measures before we get started.”

Stanislaus County Supervisor Bill O’Brien who represents Oakdale, Riverbank, and surrounding areas, spoke that he was not notified of the project until late 2010 and Stanislaus County should have been notified much sooner.

O’Brien had concerns that Stanislaus County roads and cities were the ones affected by the mine and pollution would increase, in his estimation, 10 times as what was allowed per the California Environmental Quality Act.

“This project gives Tuolumne County all the benefits,” said O’Brien, “while Stanislaus County (gets) all the impacts.”

Riverbank Mayor Virginia Madueno said she was not notified of the project until Feb. 22 of this year. Madueno felt the railroad delivery of the mined ore would impact Riverbank citizens significantly and she had concerns regarding the railroad crossings, many of which are not gated in her city.

Riverbank City Manager Rich Holmer accused the Tuolumne board of only being concerned with “their corner of the world” without weighing the far-reaching effects of the project. Holmer stated that an EIR would weigh the impacts of surrounding areas and urged that the project not move forward until one was completed.

Additional speakers commented on air quality, risk of raw asbestos being in the mine then exposed, noise, and the effect to wildlife and birds in the area.

Project developers countered that there were no “sensitive” receptors to the noise in the area, none of the four core samples had any readings of asbestos, and their biologist did not determine any disruption to wildlife by the project.

Baracco added that the Sierra Railroad was governed by federal standards and that Tuolumne County lacked standing to impose restrictions to the operation of the railroad.

Ultimately, after nearly three hours of comment on the agenda item, the Tuolumne Board of Supervisors voted 5-0 to hold off making a decision until their April 5 meeting.

“Good job everyone,” Oakdale Councilman Mike Brennan said on the return trolley trip. “It shows they’re willing to listen.”

Oakdale Mayor Pat Paul and Madueno discussed the possibility of a joint-city meeting where the railroad and mining officials would be invited.

Paul said, "It gives the mine and railroad leaders a chance to talk to the citizens."

Details of a possible joint meeting will be forthcoming.