

Proposed quarry stirs up more controversy

Bob Cuddy, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 5-5-11

The county has sent out a new request for firms to study a proposed quarry east of Santa Margarita, even as quarry developers and neighbors continue to hurl accusations at each other.

In a new round of recriminations, the latest in a string that goes back and forth, opponents are now saying that Las Pilitas Resources LLC, the would-be quarry operator, was too closely involved in the county's decision to choose the firm who was slated to conduct the project's environmental review — Benchmark Resources — in the first place.

The tussle is over a proposed 23-acre hard rock/aggregate quarry, known colloquially as the Oster mine, four miles east of Santa Margarita. The quarry would be located at 6660 Calf Canyon Highway.

Neighbors have several worries, most notably the profusion of trucks — 200 daily by some estimates — that would wind along twisting Highway 58 and through the small community of Santa Margarita.

County planners had selected Benchmark to prepare the environmental impact report measuring the possible consequences of the mine, including traffic impacts. But they decided to restart the contract process two weeks ago after neighbors complained that Benchmark is too close to the mining industry. Benchmark denied the accusation.

The withdrawal of a contract that already had been offered drew the ire of Las Pilitas Resources, whose owners called it unprecedented.

County planners justified their move by saying there was a “public perception problem” concerning the way the contract was awarded in the first place. Last Friday, they sent out another so-called RFP — “request for proposals” — to conduct the EIR.

Benchmark is on the list to receive the new request for proposals, although neighbors say it should not be.

The focus this week has turned to Las Pilitas Resources' role in the county's decision to choose Benchmark and whether it was appropriate.

Las Pilitas Resources does not deny being part of the decision-making process, and county planner John Nall says such involvement is commonplace.

Nall said that while the company was allowed to review the proposals and make suggestions, it was not involved in choosing Benchmark.

Ken Johnston of Las Pilitas Resources told The Tribune that his company will be paying for the EIR and is indemnifying the county against possible litigation as a result of the mine, so it makes sense to be involved.

He said that on the first contract go-round, the county sent him a list of the 12 firms that had been contacted about preparing the EIR, and gave his company a copy of the three that responded. Las Pilitas Resources reviewed them all, he said, and offered suggestions.

Johnston rejected accusations that Las Pilitas Resources and Benchmark are in cahoots to grease the mine proposal through the county process and past the neighbors — an accusation opponents made after checking out Benchmark online.

According to its website, Bruce Steubing, Benchmark's principal and vice president, once gave a presentation titled "Obtaining Permits and Approvals with Entrenched Project Opposition."

His audience was the California Construction and Industrial Materials Association.

It was to "provide attendees with pragmatic recommendations on how to navigate the California Environmental Quality Act process when faced with entrenched opposition. The talk will use recent examples, such as the Madera Quarry Project, to illustrate ways to overcome the difficulties of permitting a new mine today in California," the website states.

Steubing later told The Tribune the remarks were merely meant to showcase his firm's expertise in dealing with governments and neighbors.