

The foundation for a fight

Officials say need for Cemex mine is there, but SCV officials don't want facility in their backyard

Natalie Everett, Santa Clarita Signal, 11-3-11

Buying locally is a great concept, local leaders and environmentalists agree. But mining locally? Santa Clarita's answer is an emphatic "No way."

The federal Bureau of Land Management granted permits for a large-scale sand-and-gravel mine in Soledad Canyon in northeastern Canyon Country in 1990. Santa Clarita Valley residents have fought tooth and nail to get the project canceled since, saying it would clog the freeways with trucks and pollute the air.

Federal legislation that would ban mining there awaits a Senate hearing.

But state officials estimate that in the San Fernando and Santa Clarita valleys, the supply of sand and gravel, called aggregate, from permitted mines covers less than 20 percent of the expected demand in the region over the next 50 years.

And that assumes that Mexico-based mining giant Cemex would begin operations of its permitted large-scale mine in Soledad Canyon.

Local leaders in the push to stop the Cemex mine say they called the state's bluff years ago on the supposed mining shortage, and that mining can and must be done elsewhere.

Limited gravel

The state's Department of Conservation expects that 457 million tons of aggregate will be needed to cover expected construction in the San Fernando and Santa Clarita valleys over the next 50 years, according to a 2006 state study.

But mining permits for just 88 million tons have been issued so far, the study shows.

And that includes the 56 million tons that would come from the Soledad Canyon site.

Statewide, 4 billion tons of aggregate are permitted so far to meet an expected demand of 13 billion tons, according to "Aggregate Availability in California," a state Department of Conservation document.

Gravel resources aplenty

There's not a shortage of resources, but a shortage of permits to mine those resources, city leaders say.

The city commissioned a report from Claremont McKenna College's The Rose Institute of State and Local Government that looked at the economic impact of Cemex's project and found that there are more than enough Los Angeles County sand and gravel deposits to go around.

The Rose Institute report draws a distinction between reserves and resources. Reserves include aggregate material owned by a mining company with permits to mine.

Resources include all aggregate material that could possibly be mined in the future, whether it's been permitted or not.

So while Los Angeles County has 786 million tons of aggregate reserves, the county boasts 11.5 billion tons of aggregate resources, according to the 2007 report.

The report acknowledges that not all of the resources would be used due to competing interests, such as development or environmental protection.

California State Geologist John Parrish said the difference between reserves and resources is significant. Obtaining a permit for a new mine site can take four to 10 years, he said.

Parrish said there is plenty of sand and gravel in the Soledad Canyon area, but permits are scarce.

Cemex obtained a permit for Soledad Canyon, which operated as a small-scale mine for decades, only after suing a resistant Los Angeles County and reaching a settlement.

Santa Clarita Valley residents continue to resist the plan, Parrish noted.

Councilwoman Laurene Weste said there are more than enough mining resources in the state, even without Soledad Canyon.

Close to communities

Mine sites like Soledad Canyon are purposely chosen for their proximity to growing communities such as the Santa Clarita Valley because material extracted from them is taken to nearby road and housing projects, Parrish said.

This friction is not unique to Soledad Canyon, he said.

“There have been Los Angeles County areas that have grown substantially, and they have grown up to the areas of the designated mineral resource,” Parrish said.

On this point, Weste agreed.

“The amount of mining we need is incomparably small compared to the amount they would be blasting out and taking away, primarily to be trucked out of our valley,” the councilwoman said.

Housing slump irrelevant

But what about the housing slump? Why would Cemex pursue a new mine when very little new construction is going on?

“Housing slumps and construction slumps hardly affect the overall projections at all,” Parrish said.

“Building and construction work is very cyclic. ... Just because there is a downturn in construction does not

mean aggregate won't be in great demand in a couple of years," he said.

While Santa Clarita's situation isn't unique, there are particulars that make the proposed mine harder for locals and environmentalists to swallow: Santa Clarita's already poor air quality; and the site's location between two segments of Angeles National Forest.

"You have to have mining somewhere," Sierra Club executive committee member Sandra Cattell said. "But this boils down to how close it is to the people.

"We want clean air and we want clean water," Cattell said. "This is a threat to both."