

Panel Nixes Proposed Quarry

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Dismissing a call to delay its decision, the Riverside County Planning Commission voted Wednesday to deny Granite Construction's Liberty Quarry project, a proposed rock quarry that has been the subject of much debate in Southwest County for years.

To approve the project, the commission would have had to make a statement of overriding considerations, a legal determination that held the project's benefits outweighed the "significant and unavoidable" environmental effects identified in the county's review of the project.

By a 4-1 vote, with Commissioner James Porras dissenting, the commission said there was "no factual basis" to make that statement.

The decision, which Granite Construction Project Manager Gary Johnson said would be appealed to the county Board of Supervisors, was greeted with cheers and a shout of "Yes!" from the audience of 300, a crowd dominated by anti-quarry folks wearing orange T-shirts and matching hats.

During his comments, commission Chairman John Roth said the "negative impacts clearly outweigh the positive impacts." Citing opposition from the community of Rainbow, the Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians, San Diego State University and the city of Temecula, Roth said the project is "opposed from all points of the compass."

Granite has been working since 2005 ---- investing about \$10 million to date, representatives say ---- to win approval of its plans to dig a 135-acre rock quarry that would be capable of producing up to 5 million tons of aggregate material a year.

The proposed quarry site is south of Temecula, east of an ecological reserve field station managed by SDSU, north of the unincorporated community of Rainbow in San Diego County and west of the Pechanga's reservation. The tribe has said that the land where the quarry would be built is sacred to their people.

Granite had requested a three-week delay on the commission's vote to allow the company and tribal representatives to talk about the tribe's concerns.

Members of the commission rejected that request, saying that anything that might come out of those talks wouldn't affect their views on the project. The quarry was the subject of five previous hearings and meetings in Temecula that were attended by hundreds of area residents, the majority of which was opposed to the project.

Roth, a commission member since 1993, said that outpouring of opposition was a significant reason why he voted to deny the project.

"I've never had a project that engendered this much controversy and emotion," he said.

Some of the commissioners said they weren't convinced the quarry would provide the regional economic benefits touted by Granite and that some of the potential environmental effects ---- air quality, traffic, migration of animals, light and noise ---- were not properly analyzed in the county's environmental review.

Granite, citing information from the county's environmental report, has said air quality in Temecula or the nearby Wine Country would not be negatively affected by the mine, according to state standards, and that regional air quality would improve because pollution-belching trucks carrying aggregate material from points north of Temecula to San Diego County would be removed from county roads.

Commissioner Jan Zuppardo said she was not convinced by the air-quality argument.

"It's hard to believe there won't be any impairments," she said, adding that was her biggest issue in voting to deny.

Commissioners John Snell and John Petty, during their comments, went through the county's report methodically, highlighting areas they thought were addressed well and areas they felt were not properly studied.

Petty, like Zuppardo, also questioned the air-quality analysis in the report, saying the engineers did not use the proper baseline and standards in their report.

He also said the idea that the project would reduce millions of truck trip miles from Riverside County roads was not backed by a traffic study that used a "good methodology."

"I don't make that leap of faith," he said.

The technical reports that make up the heart of the county's review were systematically picked apart by residents, experts brought in by the city of Temecula and the tribe during the previous hearings and meetings.

Porras, the lone dissenting voice, said he felt the county's review, although not perfect, was legally adequate and that the claims and assertions by project opponents all were countered by project backers during the commission's lengthy review.

"This has been very tough," he said, adding that he was waking up in "cold sweats" during his deliberations on the project.

On the issue of the site's cultural significance to the tribe, Porras questioned why the tribe didn't act earlier to protect the site. Pechanga members have said the location is similar, for them, to the Garden of Eden.

If it was that important to them, he said, they should have stepped up long before and worked to protect it.

Tribal Chairman Mark Macarro, after the hearing, said the tribe has done just that in recent years, working with the county at various steps of the process to make its beliefs and feelings about the land clear.

"That's exactly what we've been doing," he said, adding that he took umbrage to Porras' comments.

Johnson, also interviewed after the meeting, said all of the proposed environmental effects of the project have been "studied to death" and adequately covered in the county's exhaustive review.

Asked to talk about the next step for the company, Johnson said an appeal will be forthcoming. The commission's vote still needs to be finalized in a meeting that must be scheduled within 60 days.

After that vote, an appeal to the county Board of Supervisors can be filed by any party, including Granite.

Kathleen Hamilton, a member of anti-quarry group Save Our Southwest Hills and one of the organizers of local rallies and opposition to the project, was ebullient as she celebrated the decision with fellow project opponents in the lobby of the county's administration center.

"I am feeling fantastic ... ecstatic, wonderful and exuberant!" she said.

Ray Johnson, a Temecula-based environmental attorney, said the turnout by opponents at the meetings had to have had a powerful effect on the commission, especially when the opponents kept showing up after public comments were no longer being accepted.

"That impresses the boards," he said. "It's not a casual opposition."

SDSU's Matt Rahn and Temecula Councilwoman Maryann Edwards were both asked after the hearing about the upcoming supervisors' meeting on the project.

Rahn, director of research at the field station to the west of the quarry site, said he's looking forward to it.

"The information is out there. The story speaks for itself," he said.

Edwards also said she is excited about the supervisors' pending review, and that she believes they will take into consideration the widespread opposition to the project and the unique location of the site: which is near both an ecological reserve and land the Pechanga consider sacred.

"I think they will be thoughtful in their considerations," she said.

Another project opponent, Southwest County developer Howard Omdahl, was standing nearby and he was asked how it felt to have his testimony about the project taken so seriously by the commission.

In his comments, Petty noted the pictures of the land near the quarry site that were taken by Omdahl and his testimony about how the project could end up sapping the mountain of water, killing off oaks and flora in the process.

"I felt I was heard," he said. "Most of the time you don't feel like you're heard."