

## Granite Fires Back

*Officials and experts for the company planning a mine near Temecula have their chance to fight back.*

**Peter Surowski, Temecula Patch, 2-15-12**

Officials and experts for Granite Construction had a chance to defend its planned quarry in front of county officials today.

They addressed the Board of Supervisors during the third hearing that will decide the fate of the project at the County Administrative Center.

All legitimate complaints about the quarry were addressed, and the project should be approved, Gary Johnson, the company's aggregate resource manager, told the board.

"We have reached out to every audience, changed and improved our plan (to allay concerns)," he said. "Over the last seven years, we have worked hard to bring you a project that works for Riverside County."

In the previous two public hearings, criticism focused on a document, called an "environmental impact report," that is crucial to the approval of a project.

Opponents alleged the mining outfit "ignored data and misstated facts," Johnson said.

"That would mean the planning commission staff, health, state and federal regulators overlooked everything," he said. "The reality is, the county environmental impact report was a comprehensive evaluation. It was prepared by a host of technical experts... Their work was reviewed by your staff."

### **The air will be OK, Granite says**

Russ Erbes, an air quality scientist hired by Granite, challenged opponents' claims that pollution would double in communities near the 414-acre quarry.

"This is wrong," Erbes told the board. "The total impacts are less than the air quality standards of the state. That's just at the project boundary, where nobody resides."

He said Granite's decision to use trucks with engines modified to burn clean diesel would result in a 50 to 90 percent reduction in particulate matter than would otherwise be possible with dump trucks that have standard engines.

Erbes repeatedly pointed to positive findings by the South Coast Air Quality Management District regarding the project's mitigation plans.

Supervisor Bob Buster countered that the agency had "long overlooked" pollution issues in Riverside County and was not immune to "political influence."

A video presented by Granite featured four area doctors, all of whom endorsed the project, including Coachella Valley anesthesiologist Reed Saunders, who disputed opponents' allegations that pollution generated by the quarry would pose a health risk to residents.

During a planning commission hearing last year, a group of 147 physicians from the Temecula Valley presented a document opposing the project, mostly because of what it would do to the air quality.

Granite's expert disagreed with them. "If what they're saying is true, we would have to believe all the quarries in Riverside County should be shut down," Saunders said.

The physician said there are eight quarries in the Coachella Valley, and none of them have the extensive mitigation provisions associated with the Liberty Quarry.

Last September, in their 4-1 vote against the project, planning commissioners cited elevated levels of silica dust and other pollutants in the first two years of the project, the permanent impact on the area's aesthetics and the adverse effects on area wildlife as reasons for their opposition.

Granite immediately appealed the commission's decision, leaving the board as the final decision-making body.

If the county denies the plan again, Granite will still have a few options to get the project built, though it will be an uphill battle, experts said.

Homeowner and environmental groups, as well as all of the area Indian tribes, are staunchly opposed to the project, arguing the quarry would result in noise, pollution, drainage and habitat changes, with lasting repercussions.

Members of the Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians say the project threatens sacred cultural sites.

The tribe event sponsored a piece of legislation protecting Indian sacred sites, which, if voted into law, would kill the project.