

Vote postponed on Jesse Morrow mining plan

Fresno County planners delay action on proposed Sierra foothills mine.

Kurtis Alexander, Fresno Bee, 2-10-12

Hundreds packed into a standing-room-only hearing Thursday to have their say on a decision on whether to mine Jesse Morrow Mountain. That decision, however, never came.

After hours of public comment, mostly against the proposed 100-acre rock quarry in the Sierra foothills, the Fresno County Planning Commission postponed its vote. Commissioners did not want to rush a verdict before the meeting's scheduled 5 p.m. finish.

During the nearly seven-hour hearing, the commission gave little sign of its position on the project. A new hearing is yet to be set.

The proposal, by Mexican cement company Cemex, calls for digging rock out of the southern slopes of Jesse Morrow Mountain for the next 50 years. The rock would be crushed on site to make ready-mix cement and trucked to local construction sites.

The company contends that construction aggregate is needed to accommodate the region's growth. Opponents, though, say commerce doesn't justify the mine's environmental toll.

"It's going to put an absolute blight on the area out there," said Dave Calvert, one of many who tried to squeeze into the meeting room at the Hall of Records. More people had to wait outside the room than could fit in. "You can see by this turnout, there are a lot of people against the project."

Jesse Morrow Mountain, which towers above Highway 180 about 20 miles east of Fresno, is the first prominent foothill beneath the high Sierra. Tens of thousands pass the landmark on their way to Kings Canyon and Sequoia national parks each year.

Opponents say the proposed quarry would compromise the area, bringing unwanted dust and air pollution, adding truck traffic to roads and disturbing the ancestral home of American Indians.

"Anywhere on that site, you're going to run into sacred objects," said Audrey Osborne, among the handful of members of the Traditional Choinumni Tribe who spoke. "It may not be a burial site, but it will be a sacred object."

Representatives of Benchmark Resources, the firm hired by the county to evaluate the project, acknowledged problems with the quarry Thursday. But the consultants said most of the problems could be minimized, and those that couldn't were a small price to pay for mining.

County planners have concluded that the project should be approved, though the decision rests with the Planning Commission. The commission's decision is likely to be appealed to the Board of Supervisors.

Attorney Pat Mitchell served as Cemex's lead advocate during the hearing.

"You need aggregate to build your communities," he said. "You need aggregate to maintain your communities."

Most of the region's mining has long taken place to the north, in the San Joaquin River basin. But many of the quarries there have begun to tap out.

Increasingly, mining companies such as Cemex have set their sights along the Kings River, where Jesse Morrow Mountain stands. Two mining projects recently were approved near the river and another, proposed by Colony Land Co., awaits county review.

The Cemex project would encompass an 824-acre plot, with 100 acres slated for mining. The plan represents a scaled-back version of the original, which called for 25% more rock than the current proposal and twice the operating years. The new alternative calls for preserving the mountain's ridgeline, which would have been blasted under the earlier proposal.

The downsizing was an attempt by Cemex to assuage local concern.

"We actually took to heart all of the comments and throttled the project significantly back and down," Mitchell said.

Only a handful of people spoke in favor of Cemex on Thursday. A member of the Choinumni tribe, who disagreed with other members, was one such speaker. He sang a traditional Native American song at the podium.

Cemex officials, who have been pursuing the quarry for more than a decade, also championed the project as a means to 20 to 30 full-time jobs and \$36 million of trickle-down business.

"This is going to be an excellent way for the Fresno local economy and the state economy to get back on track," said Sara Engdahl, a Cemex spokeswoman.

The stated economic benefits did little to appease the opposition.

"A lot of people need jobs," said Sanger resident Toni Pacini, "but you don't go blowing up your backyard to get them."