

Supervisors place quarry on fast track

David Downey, Temecula Californian, 11-7-12

A bitterly divided Riverside County Board of Supervisors voted 3-2 Tuesday to put the proposed Liberty Quarry near Temecula on the county's fast-track review process.

The action means Granite Construction Co.'s scaled-down project won't be reviewed by the county Planning Commission. It also starts the clock ticking on a 90-day deadline for delivering the proposed open-pit rock mine to supervisors for a decisive vote, up or down.

As in a string of recent votes that set up Tuesday's milestone in the project's seven-year history, Supervisors John Benoit, John Tavaglione and Marion Ashley voted to accelerate review. And Supervisors Jeff Stone and Bob Buster ---- the board members who represent the districts directly affected by the project ---- voted against putting it on the fast track.

The vote came less than 24 hours after Temecula officials sought unsuccessfully to block the board's consideration, arguing in court the city's lawsuit challenging the validity of the quarry's environmental impact report should be decided first. In a late Monday afternoon hearing, Riverside Superior Court Judge Dallas Holmes disagreed and denied the city's request for a temporary restraining order.

In a related matter Tuesday, the board voted unanimously to approve an agreement with Granite Construction that says its attorneys, at company expense, will defend the county against legal challenges to the environmental report. The city and a pair of environmental groups have sued over the matter.

As for Tuesday's fast-track initiative, brought by Palm Springs-area Supervisor Benoit, it generated comments from 10 supporters and 20 opponents.

Then the board weighed in.

"This is nothing more than a callous disregard for the residents of Southwest Riverside County," Stone said, citing opposition from three city councils and several community groups.

The supervisor from Temecula criticized Benoit for not adhering to a long-standing practice of allowing the board member from a particular district to introduce a major land-use matter from that area.

"It's just not right," Stone said. "I'm the supervisor from the 3rd District. It's my district that is going to have the impacts."

Benoit said the quarry should be awarded fast track status because it would provide benefits not just for Southwest County, but for all of Riverside County. He said having a nearby quarry would generate taxpayer savings for freeways and other construction projects.

He said that is because trucks hauling mined rock ---- called aggregate --- would not have to travel as far to construction sites.

"It costs money to put it in a truck and haul it a long distance," Benoit said.

"These are facts," Benoit said. "They may not be what the people of Temecula would like to hear, but they are the facts."

Stone attacked the notion taxpayer dollars would be saved, calling that statement "a bunch of malarkey."

"And, frankly, I don't give a damn what the expense of aggregate is to the citizens of San Diego County," he said, citing a projection that 70 percent of the mined material would be trucked south.

Proposed by Granite Construction Co. in 2005, Liberty Quarry is one of the most controversial issues ever to rock Southwest County.

Opponents include the Temecula City Council, Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians, local business leaders, community activists and others. They maintain the project on Temecula's southern border would clog local roads, foul the air, spoil the economy, destroy a site sacred to the Pechanga tribe and ruin scientific research at the nearby Santa Margarita Ecological Reserve.

Granite and its supporters, among them union members and some area politicians, argue the opposite. They say the quarry would deliver cleaner air and less-congested roads, as aggregate-laden trucks would have a shorter distance to travel to the San Diego market. Trucks now travel from as far away as Corona.

Supporters also contend the quarry would boost the economy by delivering badly needed jobs at a time when high unemployment continues to plague Riverside County. Opponents dispute that benefit, saying Granite's project would merely shift jobs here from other quarries across the region.

The city of Temecula and environmental group Save Our Southwest Hills have sued, challenging the county's handling of the project.

Back in February, supervisors rejected Liberty Quarry in a narrow 3-2 vote. But they turned around in May and approved Granite's environmental impact report when Tavaglione, who had voted to kill the quarry, joined project backers Ashley and Benoit.

Then in July, Granite submitted an application for a "new" project and requested its review be accelerated.

The new project is a scaled-down version of the original proposal to mine up to 5 million tons of aggregate annually for 75 years. What the county now is considering is a plan to mine 4 million tons a year, for 50 years, plus an offer to pay the county a fee based on how much it extracts.

And Granite's revised project now has fast track status ---- to the deep frustration of opponents.

Jerri Arganda of Rainbow, one of the most vocal opponents, suggested Liberty Quarry is precisely the type of project that should not be accelerated.

"It's unthinkable that the supervisors could even think of fast tracking this project," Arganda said.

Temecula City Attorney Peter Thorson urged, in vain, that the board "slow down."

"Surface mines are among the most complex and controversial land-use projects in any city or county, and Liberty Quarry is obviously at the top of this list," Thorson said.

Benoit, on the other hand, has relentlessly pursued fast track status despite becoming the target of much criticism from Southwest County officials and activists.

"We have a difference of opinion between a couple of supervisors and people in the community," Benoit said late last week. "Obviously I don't take it personally. It deserves to be heard as soon as possible."