

# Austin Quarry approved in 3-2 vote

**Mark Evan Smith, Fresno Bee, 7-21-16**

In a meeting that stretched past midnight, the controversial Austin Quarry at Highways 41 and 145 was approved by the Madera County Planning Commission in a 3-2 vote Wednesday, following hours of public comment marked by both the praise of supporters and pleas of opponents for additional time to review its environmental impact reports.

The decision is all but assured to be appealed within a 15-day period, which would mandate discussion and vote by the Board of Supervisors in an expected several months.

Commissioners Thomas Hurst and John Reed, appointed by Supervisors Brett Frazier and Tom Wheeler of districts 1 and 5, near where the quarry is located, voted against its approval. Luis Ceja, Ross Thornton, and Larry Pistoiresi Jr., appointed by Supervisors Max Rodriguez, Rick Farinelli, and David Rogers of districts 4, 3, and 2 voted in support.

Hurst and Reed asked numerous questions of various presenters and members of the public, while the remaining three members remained largely silent.

Opponents of the Austin Quarry, including hydrologists, traffic experts, and county residents in the nearby Madera Ranchos and Mountain Area voiced concerns mostly focused on impacts to the area's water supply, traffic, and air pollution; criticisms that have been held since Vulcan Materials Company first applied for the project in 2010. Some reiterated fears that the Ranchos and other potentially affected communities would become ghost towns because of the quarry, which could, based on outside studies not included in the project, drastically impact surrounding wells and create dangerous highway congestion.

They also asked for a 60-day continuance to review the project's nearly 11,000-page Final Environmental Impact Report, on the grounds Vulcan and the county had 18 months to prepare it, while opposing groups had less than a month since its release to the public June 28.

Proponents of the project, including separate hydrology experts, Vulcan employees, a representative of Madera Unified School District, and Madera County Economic Development Commission Director Bobby Kahn said the quarry would bring in jobs and economic benefits for the county through tax revenues and substantial fees on mined materials. Vulcan-hired attorney Patrick Mitchell also spoke about the many concessions the company made to meet the county's requirements for approval, such as agreeing to fund construction of lanes on Highways 41 and 145, as well as purchasing carbon credits to offset greenhouse gas emissions while ensuring a net-zero water balance.

More than 30 minutes before the meeting began at 6 p.m. Tuesday, Vulcan employees and family members packed the Board of Supervisors chambers clad in unified blue shirts, reading "I support the Austin Quarry," along with buttons and signs carrying a similar message. David Donaldson, Vulcan's vice president of government and community relations, said it was a sign employees were enthusiastic about their jobs and the company. A similarly-sized number of people, not employed with Vulcan and critical of the project, voiced irritation at being shuffled into spillover rooms adjacent to the chambers as a result.

More than 20 members of the public spoke in opposition of the quarry, while 11 gave their support. In total, some 250 people attended the meeting, with about 75 to 100 that stayed for the vote shortly before 1 a.m. Wednesday.

All volumes of the quarry's Final Environmental Impact Report can be found by clicking here, [www.madera-county.com/index.php/county-forms/category/773-austin-quarry-final-eir-06-2016](http://www.madera-county.com/index.php/county-forms/category/773-austin-quarry-final-eir-06-2016).