

Napa supervisors tentatively approve Syar quarry expansion

Barry Eberling, Napa Valley Register, 7-11-16

Napa County supervisors on Monday favored a Syar quarry expansion proposal and disagreed with claims that a bigger quarry will be a bad fit with adjacent Skyline Wilderness Park and nearby neighborhoods.

It's only a tentative decision at this point. The board told county staff to prepare the needed documents for a final vote at a later date.

The board voted unanimously to uphold the project's environmental report. It voted 4-1 to back the expansion, with Supervisors Alfredo Pedroza, Mark Luce, Keith Caldwell and Diane Dillon voting "yes" and Supervisor Brad Wagenknecht voting "no."

"I look at the audience and it's almost like it's pro-business and pro-environment," Pedroza said. "It's about pro-Napa."

To Pedroza, that meant allowing Syar to expand its 497-acre quarry by 106 acres and increase production from a million tons annually to 1.3 million tons annually for the next 35 years.

Wagenknecht agreed that the board needs to take a pro-Napa approach. But to him, that meant approving a smaller, 77-acre quarry expansion.

"I think it gives us protection for Skyline with the allowance for Syar to continue to deliver rock to the Napa Valley," Wagenknecht said.

The board majority saw things differently. Luce said "shortchanging" Syar by approving a smaller expansion cuts production and cuts the viability of the quarry.

"I'm particularly concerned about jobs," Luce said, adding the quarry provides good-paying, middle-class jobs.

The county Planning Commission last year approved the Syar quarry expansion. The quarry is in hills southeast of the city of Napa near Napa State Hospital and provides aggregate for local construction and road projects.

Two groups — Skyline Park Citizens Association and Stop Syar Expansion — appealed the Planning Commission's decision. They depicted a bigger Syar quarry as a hill-blasting, dust-raising, groundwater-depleting, noise-causing problem.

An environmental impact report done for the county found a bigger Syar would, with certain steps taken, have a "less than significant" impact on the environment. Appellants spent Board of Supervisors hearings on March 22, April 26 and Monday questioning a thick report that they said is full of flaws.

Supervisors had to sift through a raft of conflicting expert testimony on air emissions, groundwater use, acceptable ways to calculate data, the amount of Syar rock used locally and other topics. All sides had attorneys and consultants.

In the end, supervisors didn't agree with expansion opponents that a bigger Syar might cause such problems as having dust with crystalline silica blow into neighborhoods. Crystalline silica has been linked with respiratory problems and cancer.

Rather, they agreed with an environmental impact report that said rock on the Syar property is low in crystalline silica and that blowing crystalline silica presents no health threat.

Jim Syar, president of Syar Industries, expressed satisfaction with the board's decision.

"Every person here will use our product when they pull out of that driveway over there," Syar said. "It's become a matter of really getting people informed where materials like this come from."

Steven Booth of Stop Syar Expansion said the experience gave him an education in small-town politics and the way decisions are made.

"I think a lot of the decisions are made not on factual information," Booth said. "For some reason, there's some kind of built-in barrier between decision-making and facts."

Early in Monday's hearing, supervisors heard Syar, Stop Syar Expansion and Skyline Park Citizens Association make their final arguments to the board.

Syar representative Michael Corrigan said Syar will run out of basalt this year and basalt is the primary component of asphalt. The mine could stay open a few years longer to mine other types of rock.

Without Syar, Napa County won't have a local source of aggregate to build such projects as Napa Pipe and improve local roads. Materials would have to be trucked in from other areas, increasing traffic on key roads and increasing greenhouse gas emissions and project costs, he said.

"If we don't get this permit, it is the death knell for the Napa quarry," Corrigan said.

But Booth said Syar has presented no data showing when basalt will run out at the quarry.

Dorothy Glaros of Skyline Park Citizens Association said the proposed expansion will "damage beyond repair" the wilderness experience in adjacent Skyline Wilderness Park. That, too, comes with a cost, given Skyline attracts visitors and has hosted events such as Civil War re-enactments, she said.

"The county will lose tourist dollars," Glaros said. "The county will lose money from not being able to hold events."

Supervisor Keith Caldwell expressed concern about Skyline Wilderness Park's future, but for a reason other than Syar. The county's lease with the state for the Skyline Park land expires in 2030 and the state so far has balked at selling the land to the county. The state will study whether it might expand Napa State Hospital onto the property.

"There might not be a Skyline Park in 15 years, or it might be a Skyline Park of a different size," Caldwell said.