

County considers plans for old mine site in Jamestown

Walt Cook, Sonora Union Democrat, 4-12-10

The clock is ticking for potential developers of the former Jamestown Mine, an open-pit west of Jamestown that is slated to be reclaimed. The Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors set things in motion Tuesday by approving a request for proposals — an invitation for developers to submit ideas and bid on a project — within 100 days.

The County Administrator's Office urged the board to act fast on the issue, lest the state — which has overseen recent reclamation work at the site — move forward with reclamation plans that do not take into account the county's long-term economic goals.

Mining reclamation generally includes covering pits and cleaning up toxic substances.

Gold was mined in the area for decades, until the 1990s. Toxic substances — including asbestos, mercury and arsenic — are sometimes associated with gold mining.

The proposal being pondered by the state, which comes by way of the current reclamation contractor, “is narrowly focused on reclamation and does not take into account future mine uses,” the County Administrator's Office said in a memo to supervisors.

But that's not what the county has in mind.

County officials are hoping the site can one day be a cash cow, rather than the environmental and financial liability it's been since the county took over ownership — and thus responsibility for past misdeeds — in the 1990s.

The state ordered the county — as the site's owner — to pay \$6 million into a multi-million-dollar fund that is now being used to pay for the site's cleanup.

Over the past two years, reclamation proposals from developers have been discussed with county staffers behind the scenes, but, so far, the only private developer to give a public presentation on his proposal during that time period has been Vince Estell, of Modesto.

Estell is looking to turn a portion of the mine site into a cultivated garden on par with the world-famous Butchart Gardens in British Columbia, Canada.

His proposal would include a 95-site campground, a convention center, a hotel, shops and soccer, softball and baseball fields. The gardens themselves would cut through the center of the development on 63.5 acres.

Some, like Board of Supervisors' Chairwoman Liz Bass, have scoffed at the project's viability.

In the past, the county has considered using the property as an industrial complex and a site for county buildings. Past ideas casually tossed around in public have included using the site to grow medical marijuana and turning it into an all-terrain-vehicle park.

Ron Kopf, who is working with Estell on the garden proposal, said using the water at the mine site to water the garden would be preferable to using the site as a “giant spray-field” that simply serves a reclamation purpose.

Water quality at the site is one of the main concerns of state regulators. They have expressed worries that

naturally occurring arsenic unearthed through years of mining could be contained in pooled water at the site. Gary Wilson isn't worried about water. He owns a portion of the mine site, and, he told supervisors Tuesday, he water skis on a pit-turned-lake on his property. He added that "Whiskey Lake" contains large catfish.

Wilson is looking forward to getting private developers involved in a project at the mine.

"It's been a long time coming," he said.

Wilson owns 70 acres of the 670-acre mine site. The county, meanwhile, and private owner Robert Cameron, each own 300 acres.

Supervisors expressed concern that proposals should be vetted to ensure developers have the wherewithal and financial backing to actually see their project come to fruition.

"I want to know it's going to work, not some phantasma," said Supervisor Paolo Maffei.

"It might be a great idea, but if they don't have any money, we're certainly not going to like the proposal," added Supervisor John Gray.

The County Administrator's Office notes that even after the county approves a project, it will be subject to oversight by state regulators and likely involve a lengthy environmental review process.