

The little engine that still might

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Cemex. The name used to strike fear into the hearts of politically conscious Santa Clarita Valley residents.

Surely Mexico's multinational cement conglomerate would bring death and destruction to our valley if it proceeded with plans to turn eastern Canyon Country into a giant gravel pit - death by asphyxiation of fine dust particles and destruction of our quality of life.

The city of Santa Clarita's public-relations machine was in hyperdrive. Then, overnight, it slammed on the brakes.

You haven't heard much about Cemex the last couple of years. It fell off most people's radar. Why? Did the threat go away? No.

Removing 78 million tons of sand and gravel to produce 56 million tons of concrete aggregate still would foul our air, clog our freeways and imperil our groundwater. Not to mention the visual blight. Can you picture the welcome sign at the city's eastern frontier? "Welcome to Santa Clarita: Home to the federal government's biggest gravel pit."

That has been the real trouble all along. The fight wasn't only with Cemex. It was with Uncle Sam, as well. The United States of America owns the minerals and decides who gets to mine them. Two decades ago the federal government awarded the mining contracts. Cemex bought the company that bought the company that paid good money for them.

The city of Santa Clarita has always considered itself the little engine that could, but it ran out of track when it needed to convince a federal judge to void federal contracts that would net the federal government a fortune in royalties.

It might have been a losing battle, but the city made an important tactical maneuver along the way. When nobody was looking, the city bought the surface rights to the Cemex property. Owning the land wouldn't give the city the right to stop the mining beneath it, but the city could be a formidable obstructionist to the mining operation if it wanted to be. So the city and Cemex called a truce about two years ago. No more fighting - at least not in public.

After all, the public fight had achieved the city's purpose. It raised the noise level to a decibel that was impossible for our local congressman to tune out.

He had said as much, in so many words. If the residents of the Santa Clarita Valley are really that concerned about it, he'll intercede. And he did. It has been an evolutionary process. At first, Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon introduced legislation that would hold mining in Soledad Canyon to "historic levels" of 300,000 tons per year. Gravel has been mined in the canyon since the 1930s, but on a far smaller scale than Cemex plans. That idea didn't sit well with Cemex. Why should Cemex hold back in Soledad Canyon when it can make hundreds of millions of dollars simply by executing the valid contracts it already held?

The Bush administration didn't like it, either. What grounds would the Interior Department have for revoking mining contracts that it freely and willingly sold in 1990?

McKeon went back to the drawing board, and whether by design or by chance, he took a page from his mid-1990s playbook, when he engineered a land swap to prevent a landfill from destroying a canyon east of Newhall.

How about allowing Cemex to mine even more, somewhere else in his sprawling 25th Congressional District?

Cemex didn't really mind that idea. The company has said it doesn't really want to be where it isn't wanted, and some of McKeon's desert communities are happy to have the jobs. But the White House balked. What a headache that sort of precedent would bring on.

McKeon stuck with it and came up with a new tactic.

The city of Victorville and county of San Bernardino have had their eyes on 10,000 acres of land owned by the federal government - and they're willing to buy it with money that would come from a future economic engine they want to develop there. Would a sale of the land to Victorville and San Bernardino County generate enough money to pay Cemex the value of its mining contracts? Maybe.

Cemex hopes so. The city of Santa Clarita hopes so. Victorville and San Bernardino County hope so. McKeon hopes so. McKeon drafted a proposal and introduced it to Congress - a little more than a year ago. It didn't see the light of day because the Bush White House didn't think the numbers would work.

Another year of number-crunching led to yet another bill McKeon introduced last week. It's clearer on the subject of who gets paid by whom and when and how the values are determined. Unlike years past, the introduction of the bill wasn't greeted with orchestrated news conferences or "Thank You, Buck" banners on the local paseo bridges. And that's appropriate. This is a time for quietly crossing our fingers and hoping the Obama White House will agree the new bill solves the money problem.

If it doesn't, and we wake up a year from now with Cemex no closer to executing its Soledad Canyon mining contracts than it is today, well, that's OK, too.

Because Santa Clarita and its first mayor - McKeon - aren't showing any signs of stopping until the job is done.