

Company proposing quarry near Temecula may not fight annexation

Jeff Horseman, Riverside Press-Enterprise, 2-1-10

The company behind the Liberty Quarry project outside Temecula may back the city's latest bid to annex 4,500 acres of Riverside County land next to the quarry site, despite the city's past attempt to derail the proposed mine.

Granite Construction said it would like to support the proposed Santa Margarita Area Annexation in a statement issued prior to the Jan. 12 City Council meeting, when council members formally launched a third try at annexation.

Temecula's Planning Commission is scheduled to review the latest annexation attempt at its meeting at 6 p.m. Wednesday at City Hall, 43200 Business Park Drive. The Riverside Local Agency Formation Commission will ultimately determine whether Temecula takes over the land.

Granite, which wants to build Liberty Quarry on a 414-acre site off Interstate 15, has opposed prior annexation attempts.

Gary Johnson, Granite aggregate resource development manager, said last week that before he could endorse the annexation, he would have to look at the city's documents supporting it.

But he added: "I absolutely think there's a way that (the annexation) can be done that benefits a number of stakeholders."

The hilly land up for annexation is west of Interstate 15 and touches the San Diego County line. About 4,400 acres is taken up by the Santa Margarita Ecological Reserve, a private area used for scientific research.

City officials have said they want to annex to fulfill Temecula's long-term goal of preserving open space. Annexation could also make it easier to open the reserve to the public.

Council members and a grassroots network of citizens oppose the quarry, saying it would pollute the air, inundate roads with truck traffic and spoil the reserve.

Granite and its supporters contend the quarry would reduce truck trips and protect the environment while providing jobs and a source of a vitally needed building material.

Last summer, Temecula tried to annex the quarry site as part of a 5,000-acre annexation request vigorously opposed by Granite. The city hoped to ban open-pit mining in the area.

The local agency commission rejected the city's bid and a subsequent appeal that would have let Temecula control everything but the quarry site.

Granite also objected to the revised request, saying the plan needed further study and the city wanted to bolster its case for opposing the quarry by moving next door to it.

A hearing on the latest proposal is expected later this year.

Meanwhile, the quarry is on its own regulatory path. A final version of a 6,800-page environmental impact report could be ready by May, setting the stage for a hearing before the county Planning Commission.

The Riverside County Board of Supervisors eventually will decide whether the quarry is built.