

More Duarte residents speak against mining plan during third public hearing

Daniel Tedford, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 2-11-10

AZUSA -- The third public hearing over a controversial mining proposal got off to a rocky start Wednesday when a guest speaker was denied the use of a PowerPoint presentation.

Planning Commission Chairman Christopher Dodson's action provoked hollering and claims that freedom-of-speech rights were being violated during the review of Vulcan Materials Co.'s proposal to shift mining operations along the Azusa-Duarte border.

Daniel Hyke of Duarte was permitted to speak after police were summoned to the hearing.

"Vulcan had a 14-minute PowerPoint presentation with all the bells and whistles," Hyke said outside the hearing. "I feel (free speech) has been truncated tonight."

Dodson tried to explain to the audience that he was just trying to run a smooth meeting that wasn't bogged down by a computer setup and elaborate presentations.

"I'm not the bad guy tonight," Dodson said. "I just want to give everyone an opportunity to speak."

When Hyke did get a chance to speak, he detailed how home values in Duarte would be impacted by the mining operation.

"For most middle-class homeowners like myself, almost all our wealth is tied up in our homes," Hyke said. "The most important thing we own is being threatened."

Vulcan has a permit to mine 190 acres near Fish Canyon, although it owns a 270-acre property. The company wants to exchange the ability to mine 80 acres of land on its eastern property line in Azusa for permission to mine 80 acres near its western property line, along the border of Duarte.

For Vulcan to move forward, Azusa officials would have to approve the plan to mine the western 80 acres.

As added incentive, Vulcan has included a new technique in its plan that would contour the hills to look more natural.

The environmental report listed the view, or aesthetics, to Duarte as the only significant impact of the proposal.

Comments regarding the plan have grown divisive in recent weeks after residents and Duarte officials threatened a boycott of Azusa businesses if the proposal is passed.

More than 100 people attended the hearing Wednesday. The majority of speakers were Duarte residents who spoke about fears on how the mining would affect their health, the environment and their view of the San Gabriel Mountains.

"Fish Canyon was beautiful and wild and now it is just going downhill and I want you to save it please," said Carole Deem of Azusa.

A small faction of the crowd wore paper face masks and held signs with slogans like "Stop Vulcan now," "Azusa and Duarte united," and "Stop poisoning our families."

"It is clear to me, even based on Vulcan's presentation, even they think it is an eyesore," said Jeff Melching, city attorney for Duarte. "You have a problem that exists in Azusa and it is being shifted to Duarte."

But Todd Priest, Vulcan spokesman, said the new plan will enhance the appearance of the Azusa Rock area.

Priest said he thought some of the speakers at Wednesday's hearing focused on elements not related to Vulcan's environmental report and instead spoke out against mining in general.

"It's helpful when comments are on what is in the document so it can be responded to by city staff," Priest said. "We encourage everyone to thoroughly review the city's independent (environmental review)."

This was the fourth meeting with the Planning Commission regarding the proposal and third public hearing. The public comment period is scheduled to end Feb. 20.