

Permit renewal withdrawn for Lehigh cement plant



Los Altos Town Crier, 1-7-10

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District has withdrawn its Title V operating permit renewal for the Lehigh Southwest Cement Company, an apparent victory for increasingly vocal opponents of the Cupertino-based plant and quarry.

Los Altos Hills resident Bill Almon, who founded the opposition group QuarryNo (quarryno.com), said the air district won't submit a new permit to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency until stricter EPA rules governing mercury and other toxic emissions take effect in the spring. Although the plant can continue to operate under its current permit indefinitely, the recent action, Almon indicated, at least points out that the air district and the EPA are listening.

Almon's group had complained that resident input wasn't considered in prior discourse between the air district and the EPA, in which officials declined to object to the permit moving forward. The group outlined its concerns in a letter to the EPA.

"The EPA is now preparing a letter in response to the QuarryNo letter," Almon said.

Opponents of the long-running cement plant and quarry, formerly Kaiser Permanente, have cited problems with the plant's residual toxic emissions blowing into Los Altos Hills. Almon said his group recently conducted dust tests that measured arsenic levels 20 to 50 times higher than established state health levels. Arsenic is a poisonous element found naturally in minerals.

"The arsenic is in the limestone mined and is a common waste from mining," Almon said. "It is toxic, particularly in the air when it swirls around the cars and trucks and becomes airborne."

Lehigh's Nick Rangel provided the company's written response: "Arsenic levels at our site are consistent with naturally occurring levels in Santa Clara County" and are not harmful to humans.

In addition, air district officials see no health dangers from plant and quarry operations.

But Almon asserted that Lehigh's statement "attributed our arsenic test results to naturally occurring levels in the soil. That is not the case. Our samples were not dug out of the ground. They came from dust in the street near the BAAQMD Particulate Monitoring Station on Stevens Creek Boulevard. Regretfully, the BAAQMD only weighs the particulate – they have never analyzed it. Since everyone complained about the dust and the BAAQMD refused to analyze it, we were forced to do so."

Almon's group represents an effort to close down the 70-year-old cement plant and quarry, located just south of Los Altos and Los Altos Hills. Opponents are operating on two fronts: trying to thwart a permit renewal for the cement plant and to defeat a reclamation plan for the quarry that would expand mining.