

Azusa commission approves mining plan, but final decision is left to the City Council

Daniel Tedford, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 3-12-10

AZUSA -- After a marathon hearing which ended early Thursday with the Planning Commission recommending approval for a new mining plan, opponents said they will continue to fight to proposal.

After seven hours of testimony, commissioners Christopher Dodson, Shawn Millner and Jess Alva voted in favor of recommending Vulcan Materials Co.'s new mining plan to the City Council.

Commissioner Debbie Kindred was the sole opponent.

The proposal could go to the City Council as soon as April 5, according to Azusa City Manager Fran Delach.

City staff, who recommended the proposal's approval, were pleased with the commission's decision.

They said Vulcan's promise to do smaller cuts in the hillsides is a major improvement from the 40-foot-tall cuts planned for the current mining location.

"I think it is very difficult to look at a photograph simulation of the 40 foot Mayan benches versus the microbenching, which is dramatically more natural, and say its not better," Assistant Economic and Community Development Director Conal McNamara said.

Vulcan Materials Co. has a permit to mine 190 acres near Fish Canyon. The company wants to exchange 80 acres of land on its eastern property line for the ability to mine 80 acres near its western property line.

Nearly 200 people attended the meeting, some of whom spoke out during public comment against the proposal.

Opponents, including City Council members from neighboring Duarte, vowed to keep resisting the proposal.

"Ourgoal is to stop it," Duarte Councilman John Fasana said. "If we fail, we want some way to enforce the provisions in their permit, and some other restitution."

Duarte City Manager Darrell George was highly critical of both the decision and the process, saying commissioners failed to address serious concerns many at the meeting had about the project.

Duarte officials have concerns about hillside scarring, air quality, and whether there are enough provisions to enforce Vulcan's permit.

The city also contends that 21.5 acres on the eastern site have already had mining activity, so the move is not an equal trade.

"In my 25 years I have never sat through a seven hour Planning Commission meeting that didn't answer any questions raised over the last three months," George said after the meeting.

George backed off the that comment later Thursday, but maintained that many specifics about the project were still in question.

"The bulk of detailed answers still remain to be answered," George said. "And the Planning Commission is supposed to feel out all these questions and they weren't given the opportunity".

McNamara contended many answers were given by staff and the city's consultant, Stephen Lilburn.

"I disagree whole heartedly with Mr. George we did not address these issues," McNamara said. "Just because it isn't the answer you like, it doesn't mean it's not true."

In an environmental report commissioned by the city, the only significant impact was the view, or aesthetics, for some Duarte residents.

A Vulcan spokesman said the company was glad the commission recommended the company's plan to the City Council.

"(Planning Commission) support validates the visual and environmental benefits associated with the proposed plan," said Vulcan spokesman Todd Priest. "As was the case with the Planning Commission, we anticipate the Azusa City Council will provide a thorough and thoughtful review of the (environmental report), and that includes the public."

If the operation moves to the west, the total annual allowable amount mined from Vulcan's land would decrease from 10 million tons to 6 million tons per year, according to the proposal.

Kindred said her decision was a tough one.

"At some times, I really believed I was going to vote to approve it," Kindred said. "You have to go with your gut instinct because it does involve things in the air that are close to families and schools."