

Critics slam study on proposed quarry near Temecula

Jeff Horseman, Riverside Press-Enterprise, 11-25-00

A massive environmental study of a gravel quarry planned for a Temecula-area site triggered hundreds of letters and e-mails, many urging Riverside County to overhaul the report or deny the project.

County officials received more than 200 missives regarding the draft environmental impact report on Liberty Quarry. The comment period on the 6,800-page report, which was extended 60 days into November, ended Monday.

County geologist David Jones, who is overseeing the report, said the volume of responses is above average for a report of this kind. Officials are still cataloging comments.

The deluge of feedback speaks to the emotions concerning Liberty Quarry, proposed for a 414-acre, hilly site just to Temecula's southwest and west of Interstate 15.

Quarry developer Granite Construction wants to make asphalt and concrete and extract 270 million tons of tiny rocks known as aggregate, a common building material.

Liberty Quarry would operate for 75 years and be turned into open space afterward.

While Granite and its supporters say the project will provide high-paying jobs, hundreds of millions in tax revenue and a vitally needed aggregate source, critics say the quarry will lead to air pollution, increased traffic and environmental ruin.

Released in July, the report is a key part of the quarry approval process. It concluded the quarry would have "significant and unavoidable" effects on air quality and traffic, but found that a smaller version of Liberty Quarry was better than no quarry at all.

Granite paid for the report, which took several years to complete. County officials thoroughly reviewed the report before approving and releasing it.

Nearly All negative

In a news release, Granite said some reviewers supported the project.

"This project will help get trucks off the road and reduce air emissions, and many members of our community are coming out in support of the project because of that," said Gary Johnson, Granite aggregate resource development manager.

But nearly all of the responses on file Wednesday were critical of the quarry and the report. Many were one-page e-mails from the general public.

"At the risk of sounding like a paranoid citizen, I truly do think that the quarry is only a money operation that is not concerned about the local residents," wrote Rusty Anderson of Temecula.

Temecula weighs in

The city of Temecula submitted an inch-thick critique. Temecula officials tried unsuccessfully earlier this year to annex the property and block the quarry.

In a 23-page letter, Assistant City Attorney David Snow asked the county to delay action on the quarry until a more complete report is done.

The city finds fault with the report on a number of fronts, including its traffic analysis. The traffic study contains "numerous technical errors" and ignores roads and intersections likely to be affected by the quarry, Snow wrote.

In an e-mail, Granite spokeswoman Karie Reuther wrote that the city's comments "fly in the face of common sense." Caltrans and the county Transportation Commission reviewed and approved the report's traffic study, Reuther added.

Wildlife worries

Other government agencies commented on the report, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game.

Both agencies concluded that the quarry would sever an east-west wildlife corridor connecting mountains to coastal areas. "The (report's) inference that mountain lions are not using the site or (the corridor) is not substantiated," the agencies' letter read.

Reuther wrote the report never states that mountain lions are not present. "The report acknowledges that lions may have used the area in the past and may in the future."

She added the agencies ignored a 2003 report showing how Interstate 15 severed the corridor.

"The county studied this issue exhaustively in (the report), and it's clear that Interstate 15 bifurcated that corridor decades ago," she said.

The county must address all the comments in the report before sending a final version to the Planning Commission. Jones, the county geologist, said there's no timetable for when the final draft will be released.

The Riverside County Board of Supervisors will ultimately decide whether Liberty Quarry is built.