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Village News

Liberty annexation rebuffed by boundary agency staff

Valley News Staff

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Backed by a detailed analysis, staff of a Riverside County boundary-setting agency is recommending that Temecula's bid to block a proposed surface mine by annexing 4,997 acres of granite-strewn hillsides be rejected next week.

A recently-released report by George Spiliotis, executive officer of the Local Agency Formation Commission, concludes "there is no compelling reason" to shift jurisdiction over the area from the county to the city.

Spiliotis further noted that the county would appear to be the "appropriate agency" to evaluate whether local concerns over a mine's potential impacts outweigh regional needs for future construction materials.

The staff recommendation could be a focal point of the debate when the seven-member panel meets to review the hotly-debated annexation plan at 9 a.m. Thursday at the County Administrative Center in downtown Riverside.

But, as Spiliotis pointed out in remarks to a community group in Sun City, LAFCO commissioners have rejected staff recommendations in the past.

"It's very controversial," Spiliotis said of the proposed annexation plan when he spoke to a small group on May 16. "That seems to be the central issue on everyone's mind - the (proposed) quarry."

Spiliotis went on to say that the annexation proposal has triggered "tons of letters" from affected landowners, area residents and public agencies. Spiliotis would not reveal to the community group which direction LAFCO staff would take in its recommendation to the appointed panel.

In his 18-page report, Spiliotis said his agency has received "several hundred" letters in support of the annexation as well as thousands of signatures on petitions in favor of the annexation or against the Liberty Quarry plan. Much of the backing for annexation has come from residents of Rainbow and Fallbrook south of Riverside County's boundary, he said in his report and public remarks.

As expected, the two sides of the mine issue were sharply divided on the LAFCO staff recommendation.

"I'm confounded," said Clif Hewlett, a leader of the local group that has spearheaded the anti-Liberty Quarry effort. "It blows me away how a staff can reach that conclusion."

He said his group does not dispute the region's need for sand, gravel and other construction materials. He reiterated, though, that the proposed mining site's proximity to an ecological reserve and crucial wildlife corridor makes it "absolutely the worst place to put a gravel pit."

Hewlett said his group does not expect the staff recommendation to sway LAFCO commissioners because -- as elected or appointed officials primarily representing the county, cities and special districts -- they understand residents' desires to gain local control over growth plans that could have adverse impacts.

Conversely, a spokesman for the mining company said LAFCO staff reached the correct conclusions.

"They got it right," Gary Johnson, Liberty Quarry's chief spokesman, said in a telephone interview. "We obviously agree with it."

He said 70 percent of the private property owners in the proposed annexation area oppose Temecula's plan. Also, the high annexation costs -- in addition to Temecula's future costs to serve the area -- make it a bad deal for existing city residents.

"It's an attempt by the city to abuse the (annexation) process," he said. "That's just not right."

The staff report also detailed a split between groups and government agencies that have lined up for and against the proposed annexation.

Government groups or agencies supporting the annexation include the cities of Murrieta and Canyon Lake, the Pechanga Indian tribe, Vallecitos School District, De Luz Community Services District, Fallbrook Public Utility District, Rainbow Municipal Water District and San Diego State University and its research foundation.

Annexation supporters cite a long list of concerns over the mine plan that include possible air pollution and traffic increases, scenic view impacts and the risks posed to the region's pristine beauty and an adjacent environmental reserve and research area.

Groups or agencies that oppose the annexation or cite the need for Liberty Quarry, which is at the center of the targeted 7-square-mile area, include the state Department of Transportation, the state Lands Commission and Business, Transportation and Housing Agency, the city of Banning, Coachella Valley Economic Partnership, Riverside County Farm Bureau and the county chapters of the Building Industry Association and Associated General Contractors.

Mine supporters cite a growing need for construction materials and a desire to reduce the miles that sand and gravel must be shipped to reach construction and road building sites.

A loose-knit group of quarry supporters say the mine would bring 100 jobs and pump more than \$300 million in future tax revenue into the lagging state and county economies. They argued that nearly all the targeted area would remain open space even if it remains under county jurisdiction.

In the works for years, Temecula has spent or earmarked more than \$365,000 on its annexation bid – including some legal fees but excluding much of its staff time, according to city records. City officials say the need to preserve vanishing open space is a key goal of their annexation plan.

The developer of the proposed 414-acre mine, Granite Construction Co., has weighed in with its own stack of letters and legal analysis, Spiliotis said in his report. Granite plans to excavate more than 270 million tons of sand, gravel and other materials from a 155-acre portion of its site over a 75-year period.

It is unlikely that the LAFCO staff recommendation will dampen attendance at next week's public hearing.

When Temecula cast its final vote late last year in favor of the annexation, then-Mayor Mike Naggar said mine foes should "have 1,000 people there" at the LAFCO hearing to underscore their support.

In an e-mail statement, Temecula Mayor Maryann Edwards said her city remains committed to its longtime goal of increasing and protecting open space. She said the staff recommendation to deny the annexation has not changed the city's outlook or approach.

"We are undeterred and fully prepared for Thursday's LAFCO meeting," she said.

Mine foes – led by an environmental group formed years ago to protect Temecula's hillsides – have repeatedly thanked the Temecula City Council for its annexation proposal and mine opposition.

Group leaders spoke during the May 26 council meeting. They urged annexation supporters to step up their involvement and reported that buses have been chartered to drive proponents from a Temecula park to the Riverside hearing location on Thursday.

"It's very important for LAFCO commissioners to know how people feel about it," said Kathleen Hamilton, a De Luz resident and a founder of the Save Our Southwest hills group.

The Temecula council hearing on the proposed Santa Margarita Canyon annexation attracted about 165 people and lasted about 5½ hours. A previous

city Planning Commission hearing attracted a larger audience and sparked similar emotion-laden remarks on the proposed annexation and mine plan.

The annexation area and mine site are south of Temecula city limits and west of Interstate 15 just inside Riverside County's boundary. The mine site cannot be seen from Temecula or Rainbow, but its access road winds into the hills behind a California Highway Patrol truck inspection and weigh station.

Final approval of the annexation would thwart the development of Liberty Quarry because of a zoning change that would be imposed by Temecula. A denial of the annexation would keep land use authority for the area -- and decision-making powers over the quarry plan -- in the hands of Riverside County planning commissioners and supervisors.

In his report, Spiliotis said support for the annexation by LAFCO commissioners could open the door for a "protest" vote among private property owners in the sparsely-populated annexation area.

Most of the land in the area is under the jurisdiction of a SDSU nature reserve and research station. Many of the remaining parcels have been or would be purchased by Granite if the mine plan proceeds. Written protests from 50 percent or more of the landowners who pay property taxes in the area could thwart the annexation, Spiliotis said in the staff report.

Twenty people or less live in the proposed annexation area, which has just three registered voters, Spiliotis said. That contrasts with more than 102,600 residents who live within Temecula's approximately 23-square-mile perimeter.

In his report, Spiliotis said the extension of Temecula park ranger patrols into the area appear to be the chief benefit of annexing the area to the city.

"The minimal number of existing residents does not justify the extension of urban services," he concluded in the staff report.

3 comments for "Liberty annexation rebuffed by boundary agency staff"

8:11 pm Fri, May 29th, 2009

2. **SGPass** says :

If it wasn't for all the aggregate and construction for I-15, the great corridor that vaulted the Temecula Valley into prosperity would not exist. I guess back then Temecula did not mind the "inconvenience" to the rest of the good citizens of Riverside County. Without the freeway, there would be none of the commerce

that is so necessary to the economic success of the region, an area that concerns the needs of all the people of the county. Where was the outrage concerning the impact to the reserve when Interstate 15 was being built? All I heard was crickets chirping.

1:21 pm Sat, May 30th, 2009

3. **B** says :

Concerned over the negative impact that the Liberty Quarry would have on their lives and their health, an overwhelming number of Temecula's citizens have voiced their opposition to the Liberty Quarry. But the state governmental agencies and businesses supporting the Quarry offer profit as their motivation -- more money for Granite Construction, more tax revenue for state coffers.

Should Temecula's annexation proposal be denied, it would mean that, once again, money rules, and the people would pay the price.

This issue should be decided by a vote of the people. That is what our government is supposed to do -- REPRESENT THE WILL OF ITS CITIZENS.

1:43 pm Sun, May 31st, 2009

4. **Reality** says :

Temecula was a mining town over 150 years ago. And get this - the granite that was mined was shipped by rail down the Santa Margarita River to the coast. My what a short memory we have.