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Press-Enterprise

QUARRY PLAN

Temecula land grab hits snag

BY JEFF HORSEMAN

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Temecula's intentions to ban open-pit mining could stymie its effort to annex nearly 5,000 acres that includes the proposed site of a granite quarry.

In an 18-page report released Thursday, the staff of a boundarysetting agency recommended against the annexation of the hilly, rock-strewn land that includes the 414-acre site of the proposed Liberty Quarry.

The report said any decision about the quarry should be made by the Riverside County Board of Supervisors, which currently has jurisdiction over the land, because the operation would affect people and commerce beyond Temecula's borders.

If the annexation is approved, the city would have authority over the land. Proposed city zoning would prohibit open-pit mining there, and the door would be shut to debate over the issues raised by the quarry proposal, according to the report.

The annexation will be decided by the Riverside Local Agency Formation Commission, or LAFCO. An independent agency made up of supervisors, local officials and a private citizen, it has the power to approve or deny annexations in the county.

Thursday's report from the commission's staff did not judge the merits of the quarry itself, which has been a divisive issue for more than four years.

Many Temecula-area residents and civic leaders oppose the quarry, citing the dust and noise it would create in a region known for wineries and tourism.

The quarry's developer, Granite Construction, said critics' concerns are baseless. Supporters said the quarry will generate millions in tax revenue and create nearly 100 jobs while providing a desperately needed source of aggregate, a building material.

LAFCO will review the annexation during a public hearing at 9 a.m. June 4 in the County Administrative Center in Riverside.

The staff's findings are not binding on the commission.

In making a case for annexation, city officials have avoided addressing Liberty Quarry, saying the annexation is meant to preserve open space. But city staff reports to the City Council cast a negative light on mining operations in the area.

The quarry plans are being examined by county planners, and the release of a draft environmental study is pending.

The LAFCO staff report finds that the questions raised by the quarry would never be answered if the city is allowed to annex the land.

"The only reasons to approve the annexation are if the commission believes surface mining in any form is not an appropriate use for the area and that such a decision is appropriately a local decision," the report reads.

The report concludes that the Board of Supervisors “does have a regional interest and perspective that is called for in this circumstance.”

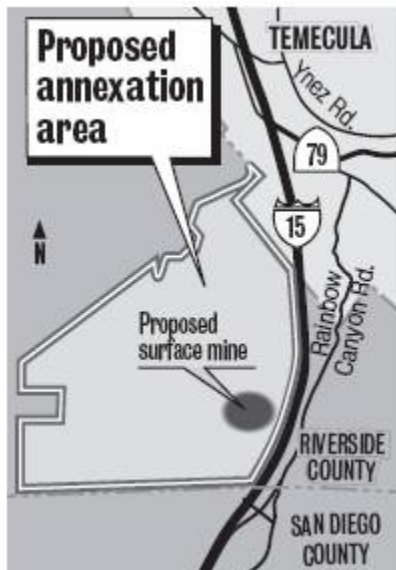
Quarry foes will still have the opportunity to express their views before the board, the report found.

Temecula Mayor Maryann Edwards said despite the report, the city will press ahead with the annexation.

“We still think that local control is the best thing when it comes to residents deciding what is best for the future of this city,” she said.

Granite Construction representatives were pleased with the report. “We think it’s the right decision,” said Gary Johnson, the company’s aggregate resource development manager.

Reach Jeff Horseman at 951-375-3727 or jhorseman@PE.com



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