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EDITORIAL: Panel should nix Temecula annexation bid

OUR VIEW: Land grab may end up costing taxpayers

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Few issues in Southwest County have elicited as emotional a response as a bid by Granite Construction to build a quarry in the hills southwest of the city.

Public opinion is almost universally against the quarry; Temecula City Council members denounced the proposal long ago. But council members have done more than denounce it: They have crafted a legislative end run around it.

On Thursday, a county agency will hear the city's request to annex nearly 5,000 acres of rock-strewn hills west of Interstate 15 at the San Diego County line. The bulk of the land contains the Santa Margarita Ecological Reserve, a nature preserve and scientific study center run by San Diego State University. About 10 percent of the land is privately owned and Granite Construction has an option to buy most of that ---- some 411 acres. The quarry would occupy about 155 of those acres, with the rest as a buffer.

Whether the quarry would be a good use for that land is an open question; the environmental study that is looking in-depth at the issue and will determine whether the impacts can be lessened enough to make it a decent neighbor has yet to be released. But if Temecula gets its way, the question will be moot: The city's proposed zoning for the land would not allow mining.

Many would cheer such a move, but we wonder whether they have thought through the fiscal ramifications. Most in the region consider themselves good conservatives, champions of private enterprise, property rights and small government. They named a park for Ronald Reagan, and more than a few were at the recent "TEA parties," denouncing taxes and Big Government.

Have they considered that the city is buying itself a whole lot of responsibility for extending city services to the area, including police and fire protection for which they, the residents, might one day pay higher taxes, or alternately, receive reduced services?

In many people's minds, the end (stopping the quarry at any cost) does indeed justify the means, but we find ourselves standing at the edge of a very slippery slope, looking down at some inhospitable terrain.

But Thursday's hearing is not about the merits of the quarry. Rather, it is about whether Temecula's proposed annexation makes fiscal sense for the county, the city and its taxpayers.

Temecula has yet to fully prove that annexation would be viable. In addition, those who oppose the quarry can voice their objections within its ongoing review process.

Thus, we hope the Local Agency Formation Commission heeds the advice of its staff members on Thursday and denies the annexation request.