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EDITORIAL: Panel should not stand in path of Riverside County quarry

OUR VIEW: Annexation a thin cover to kill quarry

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Across the county line from North County, the city of Temecula is out to expand dramatically and will present the case for its annexation of 5,000 acres before a Riverside County agency on Thursday.

If the area southwest of Temecula was seen as part of the city's natural growth area, all would be well and fine. But it is not.

Most of the area is already publicly owned and is off-limits to development by Temecula or any other entity. The overriding purpose of Temecula's proposed land grab is to stop a quarry from being built by Granite Construction on that small bit of land held by private parties, nearest to Interstate 15.

Granite's plans are going through the environmental review process and if approved, the bulk of the rock mined would go to San Diego County projects. Material for those projects is being trucked from more distant quarries through Temecula.

Public opinion in Temecula is almost universally against the quarry. And although no formal vote on the quarry has been taken, Temecula City Council members denounced the proposal long ago. But council members have done more than denounce it: They are seeking to make the land part of the city itself with proposed zoning that would prohibit mining.

The bulk of the acreage 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 has an option to buy most of that. The quarry would occupy about a third of the property purchased, with the rest as a buffer.

Whether the quarry would be a good use for that land is an open question; officials have yet to finish the environmental study that will determine whether the quarry's impacts can be lessened enough to make it a decent neighbor.

We see the quarry proposal as being good for the region. It would reduce the miles traveled by rock trucks through Southwest Riverside County to North County. Fewer truck miles should help ease the air pollution issues in Southwest County, and help slow price inflation for construction in San Diego County.

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 Riverside County, Temecula and its taxpayers ---- issues that annexation supporters seem reluctant to address.

We hope the Riverside County agency reviewing the annexation request heeds the advice of its staff members and denies it.

Temecula has yet to fully prove that annexation would be viable, because it can not. Yet Temecula residents who oppose the quarry still can do so within the ongoing review process for the quarry.