

Temecula's annexation of area around proposed quarry site vetoed

http://www.pe.com/localnews/inland/stories/PE_News_Local_S_annex05.4a28289.html

There is a video

11:22 AM PDT on Friday, June 5, 2009

By JEFF HORSEMAN
The Press-Enterprise

A commission that sets municipal boundaries for Riverside County on Thursday night rejected Temecula's plan to annex nearly 5,000 acres, a decision that for now keeps alive a granite quarry proposed for the area.

The 5-2 vote by the Riverside Local Agency Formation Commission drew hundreds to a county government building in Riverside and followed nearly 12 hours of public hearings that put Liberty Quarry on the spot and pitted the desire for local control over land use against regional demands for mines.

Temecula would have enacted zoning to ban open-pit mining in the area if the annexation succeeded. The ban would have made it next to impossible for the 414-acre quarry to be built.

Karie Reuther, spokeswoman for quarry developer Granite Construction, called the commission's decision "a victory for taxpayers. It's a victory for jobs and for the economy of Riverside County."

Despite emotional pleas from city leaders and scores of anti-quarry speakers, the commission, an independent agency empowered to approve or deny annexations, agreed with its staff's recommendation that the quarry site remain under Riverside County's control. A county environmental review of the project has been ongoing for years.

"The process got started, and I do believe it has a right to continue," said commission member and La Quinta City Councilwoman Terry Henderson. "This project has a long way to go and a lot of people to satisfy."

The commission's vote doesn't mean automatic approval for Liberty Quarry, and the project's fate likely won't be decided anytime soon.

How They Voted

Voting to accept staff's recommendation to deny the annexation on Thursday were: Henderson; Hemet City Councilwoman Robin Lowe; Banning resident Stephen

Tomanelli; Elsinore Valley Municipal Water District board member Phil Williams; and Coachella Valley Water District board member Russell Kitahara.

Voting against the annexation denial were county supervisors Bob Buster and John Tavaglione. Before the vote, Buster implored his colleagues to allow the annexation.

"(The quarry is) the introduction of a huge new use in one of the most fragile areas we've got," he said.

Temecula Mayor Maryann Edwards, a quarry opponent, expressed no regret's about the city's annexation bid, which took two years and cost more than \$250,000 in taxpayer money for studies.

"I don't think we could have done anything more," she said. "We did what our residents asked us to do and do by the tens of thousands."

The public will have a chance to weigh in on the county environmental impact report once it is a released, and the report will have to address that feedback.

Ultimately, the Board of Supervisors will have the final say on the quarry.

Edwards took solace in the fact that two supervisors supported the annexation, and she said the city will collaborate with annexation supporters.

"We are ready to present a united front at the Board of Supervisors," Edwards said.

Gary Johnson, Granite aggregate resource development manager, said the company is ready to work with its critics. "We've been trying to do that from day one," he said.

Plans call for 270 million tons of aggregate to be mined over 75 years.

Asphalt and concrete would be made there, near a pit 1,020 feet deep

The area up for annexation is hilly and undeveloped, with no more than 20 people living there.

Most of the land -- 4,300 acres -- is in the Santa Margarita Ecological Reserve, a closed-off, virtually untouched wilderness in the extreme southwest corner of Riverside County controlled by San Diego State University.

The Santa Margarita River runs through the reserve on its way to the Pacific Ocean.

Heated Debate

The quarry issue has been one of the most divisive in Temecula's history.

Annexation supporters and foes filled practically every seat in the 300-plus seat Board of Supervisors chambers. Hundreds more sat in the lobby and in fold-up chairs outside, and audio speakers broadcast the proceedings for the overflow.

Annexation supporters wore green hats reading "Annex."

Opponents wore buttons with a line going through the word "Annexation."

Save Our Southwest Hills, an anti-quarry group, arranged for busloads of allies to attend from Temecula and northern San Diego County.

Quarry critics, a broad alliance of environmentalists, small business owners and residents, say that microscopic dust particles raised by work at the quarry will harm lungs. Quarry trucks will add air pollution, they argue.

Further, opponents say the quarry will spoil Temecula's image as a vibrant wine region, sever a mountains-to-coast wildlife corridor and damage research at the adjacent ecological reserve.

George Spiliotis, the commission's executive director, gave a report in which he recommended the annexation be denied. He said the county is the best agency to consider the various issues pertaining to the quarry plan.

City officials, however, maintained that surface mining is an incompatible use for the area.

"Aggregate that would be mined at this location is not unique," Temecula Councilman Jeff Comerchero told the commission. "On the other hand, the reserve is irreplaceable."

Edwards told the commission the city is the most appropriate body to decide proper land uses for the area.

By voting for annexation, the commission would be "preserving another precious resource, the inalienable right of local control," she said.

Tribe Weighs In

City officials have said Temecula's desire to annex the land dates back to 1993; the quarry was proposed in 2005 and the city filed the annexation petition two years later.

In supporting the annexation, Mark Macarro, tribal chairman of the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians, said the land includes a location the tribe considers a place of creation and origin.

It "means not only a lot to the Pechanga people of today, but also our ancestors and future generations," he said.

Johnson, of Granite, said 85 percent of the land to be annexed is already protected.

Jobs, Impact

Granite has long insisted Temecula will hardly notice the quarry, a short distance from the Riverside-San Diego County line, and that the project will not hurt the environment.

The company maintains the quarry will provide nearly 100 high-paying jobs and generate millions in tax revenue while producing aggregate -- tiny rocks -- needed for construction. Speakers against the annexation included labor unions concerned about jobs and building trade groups stressing the need for aggregate.

Bill Campbell, a Fontana-based aggregate industry specialist, said things like quarries and jails aren't popular, but they're necessary.

"If decisions were made locally, all California landfills would be in Nevada," he said. " ...The (commission) has the responsibility to make the decision that benefits the many in Riverside County, rather than the relatively few in the city of Temecula."

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

Comments (6)



[We the people](#) 4 days ago wrote: LAFCO clearly has voted against the will of the people and should be ashamed. The PIT is something out of the third world. We need to monitor which of these compromised officials receives Granite campaign contributions.

 6  3

[kassandrasduplex](#) 4 days ago wrote: from the article...

"pitted the desire for local control over land use against regional demands for mines." Translation...the local average powerless citizens lost to Big Money Interests again. I live in Lake Elsinore where the Elsinore Valley Municipal Water District is set to TRIPLE our water rates starting July 1st 09 and ending July 2010, but there has been almost NO media coverage of this massive hike and the "board of directors" is going to do it. The People are POWERLESS. This is NOT a republic anymore. It is rule by the rich.

[Itruth](#) 4 days ago wrote: It was a 10 hour orchestrated scam by LAFCO and Granite Construction. The fact that someone could approve a one mile across, 1000 foot deep mine on top of the Santa Margarita Ecological Reserve and the last wild river in Southern California is horrendous.

 6  3

[Airtime](#) 4 days ago wrote: LAFCO had already made up it's mind, this hearing was held as a form of entertainment for LAFCO.