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A few of Rosemary's Mountain, where Granite Construction Co. plans to build a quarry in the next few years.

Photo courtesy of Granite Construction Co.

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Plans for Rosemary's Mountain quarry grinding along

By: TOM PFINGSTEN - Staff Writer

FALLBROOK ---- A developer with plans to excavate gravel from Rosemary's Mountain still has permits to file, land to buy and \$20 million worth of road work to complete before it can begin operating at the site near Interstate 15 and State Route 76, officials said last week.

However, with a key land-use permit in hand, the developer, Granite Construction Co., says it is confident it can complete most of those tasks and break ground at the small mountain visible from I-15 by late summer.

Granite Construction, with its controversial proposal to build Liberty Quarry in neighboring Riverside County, is also developing the Rosemary's Mountain quarry, where about 1.1 million tons of rock a year will be mined for 20 years, according to project manager Gary Johnson.

"We hope to break ground before the end of the summer," Johnson said. "We are completing the design of the Highway 76 widening and straightening, and trying to acquire the mitigation land and put it into a trust, which is a condition of the project."

Mitigation land is property that must be bought and set aside as natural habitat to make up for undisturbed land that will be developed at the project site.

Granite Construction says it is working with a partner, Palomar Aggregates, but has the lead role in developing Rosemary's Mountain.

The total size of the Rosemary's Mountain site is 94 acres, but only 38 acres will be used to mine "aggregate," an industry term that describes the mix of sand and crushed rock that are key ingredients in asphalt and concrete.

When it is developed, the site will have an asphalt plant and will provide a source of building materials that Granite Construction says will be in short supply in North County within the next few years.

Meanwhile, members of the project's steadiest opponent, RiverWatch, say they are still opposed to

the location of the quarry, but are out of tactics to delay the project.

While the Liberty Quarry proposal is relatively new, Johnson said, his company has been working to get the Rosemary's Mountain project approved for six years. Before that, Palomar Aggregates was fighting to gain approval for more than a decade, first applying for a permit to operate a quarry there in April 1987, he said.

The most important permit for the Rosemary's Mountain facility, the land-use permit, was issued in October 2002 by the county, Johnson said.

Soon after, RiverWatch, a group of residents best known for its fight against the proposed Gregory Canyon landfill, filed a legal challenge, charging that the environmental impact report did not adequately address the effects the quarry would have on air quality.

The lawsuit was struck down by the 4th District Court of Appeal in October 2004, and Granite Construction proceeded with plans to begin mining.

On Thursday, RiverWatch leader Ruth Harber said she remained opposed to the quarry, though her group has largely given up the struggle since its lawsuit was struck down.

"We're still opposed, but unfortunately there's nothing much we can do," Harber said. "This kind of stuff does not belong next to ... the San Luis Rey River. It's not compatible with our environment."

She said the group stays up to date on the project and would like to keep Granite Construction honest about the effects its project may have, but cannot afford to attempt another legal challenge.

Road work, other challenges

Still, hurdles remain for developers of the Rosemary's Mountain quarry.

One is the requirement to widen Highway 76 to four lanes from Interstate 15 east to the turnoff to the quarry ---- about 1.3 miles ---- before the site can begin operating, Johnson said.

"When we break ground, the first thing we're going to do is widen and straighten a portion of State Route 76," he said. "It's a very costly endeavor, but it's something that's very badly needed. It's a dangerous stretch of road."

The improvements are designed compensate for the 250 to 300 daily truck trips that the company estimates the quarry will add to the already busy highway.

Sam Amen, the California Department of Transportation project manager overseeing Granite Construction's road widening, said this week that the developer has to finish securing a right of way for the entire corridor and furnish several environmental permits before it can begin.

"The environmental permits have to be ready before they start digging any soil," Amen said, estimating that the project will take about two years to complete because certain times of year will be off-limits to road work due to sensitive river habitat nearby. "They've said they can do it faster, which may be. But if they work regular hours, it's going to take two years."

Johnson said his company must also buy some more land to set aside elsewhere in the county to offset the environmental effects of the quarry, a common practice when developers disturb sensitive habitat.

In all, about 94 acres will be set aside, he said. "Probably the biggest thing that's held us back is acquiring and putting plans together for three separate pieces of property that will be permanently protected as mitigation for the impacts of the project."

Comparing operations

Rosemary's Mountain will be a much smaller operation than the proposed Liberty Quarry, where Granite Construction plans to mine about 5 million tons of aggregate annually for 50 to 60 years.

If built, Liberty Quarry would offer 155 acres on which to mine sand and gravel, as opposed to 38 acres at Rosemary's Mountain.

Plans for Liberty Quarry were submitted in March 2005 to Riverside County officials, because the property is just north of the Riverside-San Diego county line, to the west of I-15 near the Temecula Border Patrol checkpoint.

That proposal has also drawn heated opposition, as nearby residents protest the ill effects they say the quarry will have on everything from the environment to property values.

Perhaps because it is larger, and because of its location near communities in two counties, the Liberty Quarry proposal has drawn fire from a wider range of residents, with two groups scrutinizing every detail of the proposal.

Protests to the Rosemary's Mountain project mostly focused on added traffic on Highway 76 and the dust that opponents have said will affect air quality in the area, but have died down in the last two years.

Why both?

Recently, some who have gotten involved in the protests over Liberty Quarry are surprised to learn the same company has a second facility in the works less than 10 miles away that will produce the same type of materials.

Johnson, however, said both quarries are "absolutely" needed to serve the construction industry in North County and Southwest Riverside County.

Some state officials agree.

State geologist John Parrish said Thursday that current aggregate supplies may begin running dry within a decade if quarries such as Rosemary's Mountain are not built.

"The thing about aggregate is that it is a low-value, high-volume commodity," Parrish said. "It needs to be produced close to the area of consumption. Otherwise, the cost of transportation is extremely high."

Parrish said the current price of aggregate at the source is about \$7 per ton, and that trucking a ton of aggregate 30 miles costs about \$4.50. This means that the price of the material is approximately doubled if it is transported 45 miles, and the cost of the transportation is almost always passed on to the taxpayer or consumer, Parrish said.

"It leads to higher costs for roads, which the taxpayers pick up, and higher costs for housing, which of course the consumer picks up directly," he said. "If you were building one mile of a six-lane interstate, it would take 113,000 tons of aggregate. If you had to transport that amount just 30 miles, from a mine to where the road was, it would add \$510,000 to the cost of that project."

Parrish pointed to a recent study published by the state's Geological Survey that he said illustrates that agencies throughout the state will need to begin "permitting," or approving, more sources of aggregate soon.

The study found that western San Diego County ---- a region that includes most of the county's developed areas, excluding the mountainous eastern parts ---- will require about 1.1 billion tons of aggregate to satisfy building requirements in the next 50 years.

"There is plenty of this type of rock in California," he said. "We're not running short of the rock, but we are short of permitted supplies."

He also emphasized the high cost of transporting the heavy rock, and said if consumers and taxpayers don't mind paying higher prices for roads and houses, the solution could be to import building materials.

Otherwise, quarries will have to be built near communities like Fallbrook, where development is anticipated, he concluded.

Johnson has predicted for years that Rosemary's Mountain ---- which is much nearer to completion than the Liberty project ---- would not be enough to satisfy local demand for aggregate.

During a 2004 interview, before Granite Construction began pursuing plans for Liberty Quarry, he said Rosemary's Mountain would not be the only gravel mine needed in the area.

"It takes a very long time to start these facilities," he said last week. "We're anxious to get it up and going."

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