

Supporters, opponents of proposed Temecula quarry to square off at 1 more public hearing

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Granite Construction operations manager Gary Johnson at Rosemary Quarry near Temecula

Supporters and opponents of Liberty Quarry project have jammed recent planning commission hearings.

The battle over a proposed open-pit quarry in southwest Riverside County heats up again this week. A county planning commission is winding up public hearings over the contentious project. Supporters say Liberty Quarry will bring in good jobs and millions of dollars in tax revenue. Opponents say the cost for that will come in hazards to public health and the environment.

The Quarry would be chiseled into the steep foothills a few miles south of downtown Temecula. Northern California company Granite Construction is seeking a permit to blast and crush rock for use in cement and asphalt.

Temecula resident Kathleen Hamilton stands at the bottom of a twisting county road that leads to the proposed 155-acre quarry site in a shallow ravine above Interstate 15 near the San Diego County line.

“We are right at the entrance where the Liberty Quarry has been proposed, the front of the hills will be completely defaced with the road that would have semi trucks going up and down.”

Hamilton helped launch the effort to block the quarry from opening on land bordering the Santa Margarita Ecological Reserve; a 4300-acre field research station operated by San Diego State University.

“It’s like putting a rock concert next to a monastery,” says Hamilton. “They’re just not compatible. No serious scientist would ever come to do research they expect to be taken seriously if it’s next to one of the biggest hard rock mines in the nation.”

There are actually much bigger rock quarries – including one that Granite Construction operates in the Coachella Valley. A Riverside County planning report calls the Liberty Quarry proposal environmentally sound. Though planning commissioners say that doesn’t necessarily guarantee approval.

Supporters like Steve Bledsoe are among the hundreds of people who’ve spoken out for and against the project at public hearings. He trumpets the high-paying jobs & millions in annual tax revenue the quarry could generate. Bledsoe is with the California Construction & Industrial Materials Association.

“Aggregate, sand and gravel, crushed stone are essential to the renewal of

California, and with jobs and taxes,” says Bledsoe. “Jobs and the local economy will improve by the fact that this business exists.”

Opponents say it’s not worth it. They worry the project would generate hazardous silica dust and diesel truck pollution. Dozens of Temecula doctors signed a petition opposing the quarry. Pediatrician Collette Grant didn’t. She told planning commissioners why:

“I have searched the medical literature and discussed the concerns of silicosis with specialists in pediatric allergy & asthma,” said Grant. “I have found no link between silica and pathology in the pediatric population. I whole heartedly support this project without any concern that it is a health hazard to my community”

But there are other worries that can’t be measured by economic surveys and environmental impact reports. Pechanga Indian tribal chairman Mark Macarro told county planning commissioners the quarry would scar a sacred site woven into the tribe’s history.

“The proposed quarry site compromises the place our creation myth origin,” says Macarro. “We implore you to reject Liberty Quarry and stand with Riverside’s County’s first people in respecting one of our most critically important sacred site.”

To get a sense of what Liberty Quarry might look like, people need only travel about 7 miles south to Rosemary Quarry in San Diego County - Granite Construction’s other local open-pit mine.

“You know it’s pretty basic these are hard rock quarries so we drill, we set off a shot, we generally blast about 10,000 cubic yards at a time,” says Granite Construction operations manager Gary Johnson as he survey’s the 40-acre quarry’s open pit.

Diesel trucks motor up and down the unpaved road that rings the quarry - just feet from a property line it shares with a small farm. An orchard of citrus trees fans out over a hilltop, so close that truck drivers could pull over and pluck the fruit.

“Yup, it’s less than a thousand feet from where we’re blasting, his house,” says Granite Construction spokeswoman Karie Reuther, referring to the farmer who leases the mountain to the company.

“And we’ve had no impact on his fruit since we’ve been here.”

Operations chief Gary Johnson says Liberty Quarry won’t negatively impact surrounding communities or nearby ecological reserve either. He claims it will actually improve air quality by cutting down on big rig shipments from hard-rock sources outside the area. The company also plans to take other steps to ease the projects footprint, like using more fuel efficient trucks.

“We’ll be doing air monitoring and vibration monitoring to make sure there is no impact,” says Johnson.

“So it’s a great site, we look forward to getting county approval, let the citizens of

Riverside County start seeing some of these benefits.”

Even if Liberty Quarry wins approval from county planning commissioners, seeing those benefits could take awhile. The project would then require another round of hearings before the county board of supervisors.

People waged a similar battle over the much smaller Rosemary Quarry. That fight played out in county chambers and in the courts for 20 years before a single ounce of rock could be pulled from the mountain.