

Hot plant proponents attempt to allay public's fears at forum

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"We can agree to disagree" became a common refrain Tuesday evening as proponents of a proposal to place an asphalt plant at the Hogan Quarry near Valley Springs hosted a public meeting to present their side of the issue and field questions from the public.

Tuesday's meeting in the La Contenta Events Center attracted slightly more than two dozen people, when those associated with the project and the media are excluded from the count, while a gathering Saturday by project opponents drew an audience of approximately 60 people.

Most of those in Tuesday's audience seemed to oppose or were skeptical of the project and addressed their concerns in a lengthy, nearly two-hour-give-and-take question-and-answer session with the project's principals, consultants and attorneys.

Diane Kindermann, an attorney representing Ford and CB Asphalt, gave a brief overview of the project from her clients' perspective and distributed a fact sheet, before being peppered with questions from the audience. She said one of her goals was to leave with the feeling everyone's questions had been answered, but at the end of the night, many in the audience felt their concerns had been unresolved, especially when it came to whether property values near the proposed hot plant would drop significantly if the project was approved.

Increased traffic, nighttime hours of operation, air and water pollution were also concerns voiced by the audience.

An engineers' report issued last week to the Calaveras County Air Pollution Control District should allay any concerns on the air pollution issue, project proponents said. The report determined emissions from the proposed asphalt plant would be well below thresholds considered significant. Proponents had only one copy of the report at Tuesday's meeting and promised to mail or email copies to those in attendance.

However, the project's backers admitted once the asphalt is dropped into trucks, residents will be able to smell the odor as those trucks transport the hot mix to the job site.

The fact sheet said the hot plant would generate a maximum of 625 additional truck trips annually, and the frequency would depend on market demand. Those additional trips would be generated by the delivery of the asphalt binder to the plant, estimated to average less than three trucks per operating day.

Otherwise, truck traffic would remain the same because those trips in the past for shipment of gravel would now be for the shipment of asphalt.

The quarry's capacity would remain the same, said Nick Jones, president of Ford Construction, and most of the rock mined from the quarry now would go toward the production of asphalt.

One of the items in the fact sheet concerning truck traffic drew an apology from Kindermann. The sentence said, "Truck traffic will flow through the existing entrance/exit, and not by any residential areas."

Kindermann admitted the statement was incorrect and "not articulated properly." She said an associate prepared the fact sheet and she did not have enough time to thoroughly proof it.

Jones also said he has little or no authority over truck drivers once they leave the quarry.

Residents said truckers regularly violate the speed limit and run the stop sign at Silver Rapids Road and Hartvickson Lane.

There were concerns a truck accident along Silver Rapids Road would end up with asphalt spilling into the adjacent Calaveras River.

When asked to guarantee another statement in the fact sheet, proponents hesitated.

It said, "The plant is located nearly ½ mile away from the closest residence, and will have no anticipated impacts on property values."

Area residents asked whether Ford Construction and CB Asphalt would buy homes if they lost value or could not be sold and the answer was "No."

A Google Earth slide shows the closest residence to the proposed plant is .375 miles.

When questioned why asphalt equipment had already been moved to the quarry prior to approval, Kindermann said the owners were within their rights to do so, but those pieces had not been set up.

In addition, she said the owners never expected this to become an issue because they had received county approval in the past for a plant, but those ventures never reached fruition.

Those previous approvals and conformance to all state and federal regulations are the reasons why owners are reluctant to go through what can be a costly environmental review process.

Kindermann said such a process would be "redundant."

However, nearby residents said such a review would offer them assurances the project would not have any adverse impacts.

Area resident Brock Estes said Ford Construction and CB Asphalt should consider relocating the proposed asphalt plant near the county's Rock Creek Solid Waste Facility in the rural area between Jenny Lind and Milton.

Hours of operation would be dictated by asphalt contracts with Caltrans, said Shaun Simmons, western division manager for CB Asphalt, Inc. and Chester Brothers Construction. The 14-year Valley Springs resident, said it is not his company or employees' desires to work late or early, but sometimes Caltrans makes those specifications for their projects.

When residents and proponents did not find common ground on the issues, Brian Holloway, the evening's facilitator would reach for the refrain "We can agree to disagree."

Appeals from both sides are expected to go before the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission in August.