

No Concrete Direction

After Four Hearings, Planning Commission Makes No Recommendation on Gravel Pit

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A controversial plan to mine gravel in Sunny Valley will go to the Josephine County Board of Commissioners with no recommendation from the Rural Area Planning Commission.

The planning commission Monday night ended the fourth long hearing on the plan by deciding more analysis was needed of traffic safety and effects on groundwater and wildlife, and they could not vote to deny or allow the mining operation.

Then commission member Gary Desimone moved they vote "to see where we stand," and the outcome was 3-3.

Before that vote, planning commission Chairman David Church said "There's no reason for us to continue," after the board voted 4-2 to require more analysis.

The final decision will be made by the Board of Commissioners anyway, said County Commissioner Simon Hare.

"This is pretty rare," Hare said, referring to the lack of a consensus from planners. "It's not such a bad thing. We'll probably do three hearings."

"We get to start from scratch. Everybody gets to testify," said county Planner Grace Zilverberg.

Hare said he expects the project will end up in front of the state's Land Use Board of Appeals, regardless of whether it's approved by the Board of Commissioners. "It wasn't all for naught," added Zilverberg, who had to guide the process at times Monday night. "It's been a useful process. Painful, but useful."

The first hearing before the Board of Commissioners is set for June 23 at 9 a.m. at the Anne Basker Auditorium. Sunny Valley Sand and Gravel has been asked to submit more analysis on the impacts on traffic, groundwater and wildlife before it can mine 6 million cubic yards of gravel over two decades. The application thus far has 1,400 pages.

Church, who eventually opposed the project, said he struggled all weekend with it.

"I just don't think the application is consistent with the character of the surrounding area," he said.

Opponents seemed relieved afterward.

"I'm very happy they took into consideration the last three votes, that it's already an existing neighborhood, not just something waiting for industry to show up in the backyard," said Kristin

Whitaker, who lives near the proposed site.

Sunny Valley Sand and Gravel owner Andreas Blech was unavailable for comment as he rushed to make a conference call. Early in the hearing he waived his opportunity to provide a summation.

Opponents, however, jumped at the opportunity.

"The human factor is part of the evaluation," said Vajra Ma, who lives near the proposed site. "What about the preservation of the character of the land involved? The character of Sunny Valley is quiet, peaceful and charming."

Effects on groundwater continued to be debated. Opponent Steve Rouse said a letter from the Oregon Water Resources Department to Josephine County Watermaster Kathy Smith on May 13 shows the department continues to have doubts about the plan because of potential "intersection" with groundwater feeding Grave Creek, which supports salmon and steelhead. Several ponds will be used at the site to store water used for cleaning gravel and keeping dust down.

Rouse believes a letter from Martha Pagel, a former director of the state water resources department and now a lawyer working on behalf of Sunny Valley Sand and Gravel, does not prove water impacts will be mitigated. Pagel proposed that ponds could be lined with clay or fabric.

"It's pure speculation," Rouse said.

While Placer Road's traffic load would require 12-foot lane widths and 5-foot shoulders with any new construction or reconstruction, it currently has 11-foot lanes and 2-foot shoulders.

Planning Commission member Jocelyn Richardson expressed concern for the safety of mail carriers, and traffic analysis done by the applicant was judged insufficient regarding sight distance for vehicles at the intersection of the proposed access road to the site.

Concern was also aired about traffic near the historic Sunny Valley Covered Bridge, the grave site nearby that Grave Creek is named for, and for tourists coming from the Applegate Trail Interpretive Center down the road.

Planning commissioners also did not want to allow or deny mining until a legal decision had been made on whether effects on property values could be part of planning.

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