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Council debates Roblar rock quarry

Applicant willing to divert trucks away from protected land

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Emotions ran high and accusations abounded on Monday night during a discussion of the proposed Roblar Road rock quarry just north of Petaluma on Monday night, with the City Council ultimately deciding to consider a resolution opposing the project at a future meeting.

Council members split on whether to pass a resolution strongly opposing the project or send a letter to the county outlining concerns that the city has over its impacts.

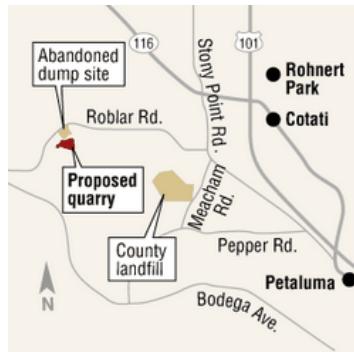
Mayor Pam Torliatt said that she favored a resolution that makes a "larger statement" condemning the impact the project could have on Petaluma.

Councilmember David Rabbitt said that he has "major concerns" about the quarry, but that the council should not dismiss the project and should look at possible improvements and benefits.

The controversial project, which was first proposed in 2003, has stirred harsh disagreement on a number of issues. Opponents of the project say that the plan includes a misuse of taxpayer money and could expose neighbors to contaminated groundwater and airborne toxins. Supporters argue that the potential environmental problems are manageable, and that the county needs a local source of rock material for construction work.

The application for the quarry was filed by John Barella, the former owner of North Bay Construction. Barella plans to mine the site for rock material, which then will be trucked out for use in road and construction projects. The site sits next to an old landfill used by the county, and opponents worry that blasting at the site could cause the unlined landfill to leak into the groundwater. Blasting could also release toxic silica particles into the air, opponents say.

The most contentious part of the plan is the proposal to drive trucks through four acres of land that had previously been set aside by the Open Space District for preservation. The district buys and spares land from development, and is funded by a quarter-center sales tax approved by voters in 1990. In exchange for using the land, Barella has proposed donating his nearby land to the district after mining operations are done in 20 years.



“The Open Space District is not a partner in this project. This is not what this fund is for,” said Donna Norton, a member of Citizens Against Roblar Rock Quarry (CARRQ) on Monday.

Robert Piazza, another member of CARRQ, said that if the project is approved, voters will be “defrauded,” about the Open Space District, which will be “subsidizing private industry.”

Barella responded to the criticism, saying for the first time that he would be willing to re-direct the road if the county’s planning department would agree.

“It was not my idea to use that four acres,” said Barella, adding that, “If they want to make me go down Roblar Road, I’m not opposed to going down Roblar Road (rather than through Open Space District land).”

Barella sharply criticized the council for the “surprise” resolution and defended his project.

“I stepped up to the plate on every issue,” he said.

Barella said that a local source of rock reduces the emissions from shipping rock from Canada, as the county currently does.

“Where are you going to get rock to fix this infrastructure? If you’re a true environmentalist, you’d welcome this project,” he told the council.

The City Council first considered opposing the project outright, citing many of the same concerns as opponents. Most council members said they were not comfortable using Open Space District land on the project. Differences, however, emerged on the degree to which the city should condemn the project.

Rabbitt said that he did not agree with some clauses in the proposed resolution, including the statement that the quarry would increase greenhouse gas emissions. He said that a local source of rock could have benefits if the most serious impacts can be mitigated.

Councilmember Mike Healy cautioned against spending staff time on the resolution or study, saying that the issue is “complex” and is up to the county.

Others were stronger in their opposition.

“The county planning department has not done its due diligence, has not seen these issues, and these will impact us in Petaluma,” said Councilmember Teresa Barrett.

The council directed the city attorney to return with language for a resolution to discuss at the Oct. 18 council meeting.

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