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Roblar Road rock quarry approved

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A split Sonoma County Board of Supervisors Tuesday tentatively approved a rock quarry proposed west of Cotati during a lengthy hearing highlighted by a packed board chambers, heated exchanges and a physical altercation.



JEFF KAN LEE / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors meeting room remained full Tuesday throughout the four and a half hour public hearing on a proposed rock quarry on Roblar Road west of Cotati. The board approved the controversial project on a 3-2 vote.

Supervisors Mike Kerns, Paul Kelley and Valerie Brown voted for the quarry, with Brown representing the swing vote.

"I think this project is as safe as it can be," Kerns said of the quarry, which is in his district. He said it will be subject to 46 pages of requirements for environmental safeguards, habitat mitigation and road improvements.

The quarry is planned for 70 acres off Roblar Road and would produce about 11 million cubic yards of construction-grade rock worth about \$60 million over at least 20 years.

Supervisors Shirlee Zane and Efren Carrillo voted no, expressing concerns about impacts on the environment and county open space.

Zane said the vote seemed rushed because the quarry is not expected to begin operation until 2015 to allow time for a Williamson Act agricultural preservation contract covering the property to expire.

"What this hearing has done for me is bring up more questions," she said. "I'm not understanding why we're rushing this."

The vote came after more than three hours of public testimony, lengthy staff presentations and board deliberations. The debate included testy exchanges between quarry opponents and supporters, including supervisors and members of the standing-room-only crowd of hundreds.

At one point a quarry opponent was removed from the board chambers by a sheriff's deputy after exchanging sharp words with quarry owner John Barella and his biologist and punching the biologist in the shoulder.

Brown, the board chairwoman, also ordered a brief recess late in the hearing after Kerns and a quarry opponent who was filming the meeting traded verbal jabs over Kerns' support for the project.

Tuesday's hearing bore some resemblance to a meeting last week when a divided board featuring Carrillo as the swing vote approved the disputed Dutra asphalt plant south of Petaluma.

How to best create jobs, provide a local source of construction material and protect the environment were all points quarry supporters and opponents sought to make Tuesday.

"The key word is local jobs, local materials and local tax revenue," Gail Cochran, owner of a Santa Rosa-based construction firm, said voicing her support for the quarry.

Opponents, including residents who live near the quarry, said the risk that blasting and digging could leach toxins from a nearby shuttered county landfill into area groundwater should be a strong red flag.

They also said that the county and Barella had shown no proof that another source of construction-grade rock was needed.

"Opening a quarry doesn't increase the number of building projects" or "magically" create jobs, said Gary Reed, a Sebastopol general contractor.

Barella, former owner of North Bay Construction, said he was "drained" by the hearing, but pleased with the outcome.

In exchange for approval, Barella had pledged to donate 130 acres of his land surrounding the quarry to the county, plus the reclaimed quarry itself once operations are complete, and an open space easement on his 244-acre ranch along the Petaluma River.

"I thought we presented a good project," he said.

Tuesday's meeting focused at length on two complicated issues associated with the quarry: impacts on the county's taxpayer-supported open space and a condition requiring Barella to indemnify the county and cities against legal claims stemming from any quarry pollution problems from the former dump.

Early on in the hearing, Supervisors Brown, Carrillo and Zane dealt with the controversial first issue by opposing a proposed haul road that would have crossed nearly four acres of nearby dairy pasture protected by a county open space easement.

Now, Barella must use an alternative route requiring improvements to Roblar and Pepper roads, an expense he said he was willing to bear.

On the other issue — indemnification of the county and local cities in the event of a pollution problem — members of the city councils of Petaluma and Cotati, both of which have opposed the project, said the county indemnification deal with Barella fell short. It would provide a \$7.5 million insurance policy to cover legal claims and cleanup costs.

Supervisor Carrillo, echoing the city officials, said the amount seemed insufficient.

Brown, later voicing her support for the quarry, said she was satisfied with the dollar figure and by state reviews of the air and water quality safeguards.

Nevertheless, opponents said the county presented them with significant evidence to support their contentions that there not been adequate study about possible water contamination that could be caused by blasting and digging near the former county landfill.

At one point Chief Deputy County Counsel Sheryl Bratton, the board's advisor on the matter, told supervisors that the county had not allowed Barella to undertake a "full characterization" of the contents of the former landfill because "you never know what you're going to get with that."

Opponents in the audience erupted in comments of disbelief and frustration.

After the hearing, Sue Buxton, president of the main opposition group, Citizens Against the Roblar Road Quarry, said Bratton's comments and other issues not addressed by the county review would provide significant grounds for a legal challenge.

"That's the best thing she (Bratton) could have said for us," Buxton said.

The board's action came in the form of tentative approvals of the draft environmental impact report, a zoning change, a use permit and reclamation plan.

Supervisors are set to formalize their vote Dec. 14. A separate hearing on Nov. 9 will focus on endangered species mitigation required by the project. Public comment on that issue will be allowed at the hearing.

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