

Both sides of Morrow mine debate ramp up rhetoric

By Kurtis Alexander, staff writer
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Advocates and foes of the proposed mine on Jesse Morrow Mountain stepped up their campaigns for the hearts and minds of Fresno County residents in advance of Tuesday's project hearing.

Cemex, the multi-national company behind the project, took its message of jobs and economic growth to the radio waves and home mailboxes. Opponents used roadside billboards and newspaper ads to paint a picture of mining destruction.

Hundreds of comments, from both sides, poured into the offices of county supervisors, who will referee the high-stakes decision.

The project involves a sand and gravel quarry and asphalt plant across 824 acres of Jesse Morrow Mountain, an iconic foothill about 20 miles east of Fresno. The mine is expected to operate for 50 years.

"They're not going to destroy the mountain," said John Davis, a leader in the Native American community, which is split over the project. "They're just going to punch a hole in it and take what they want."

His faction of the Kings River Choinumni Farm Tribe will be given 40 acres of Cemex property on the mountain if the mine is approved, according to Cemex officials.

The Planning Commission rejected the project in May, but Cemex officials appealed.

Opponents, who far outnumber supporters of the mine, say the company has little ground to stand on. They dismiss arguments that the mined rock is vital to regional growth and say the quarry would add traffic, pollution and blight to eastern Fresno County.

The mine would sit above Highway 180, north of Reedley.

"We're going to hear both sides out completely and make a decision," said Supervisor Henry Perea, one of four board members who will vote Tuesday. Supervisor Judy Case said she will recuse herself because of a conflict of interest.

[Fresno Bee column, Monday, Aug. 27, 2012:](#)

Morrow mine – good idea but wrong place

By Bill McEwen

Much has happened in the 10 years since plans to mine Jesse Morrow Mountain became public.

There have been environmental reports, hearings, outreach by mining companies and shouting matches.

Opponents have organized, held fundraisers and bought billboards. The mountain's owners have changed and mining plans have been scaled back to address environmental concerns.

Back in 2002, John Navarrette was a spokesman for RMC Pacific Materials, which wanted to mine the mountain. Now he is Fresno County's administrative officer, and the 2,083-foot peak is owned by Cemex, an international materials company.

But one thing hasn't changed: Jesse Morrow Mountain is worth saving.

Today the county Board of Supervisors will decide whether to allow mining. With Supervisor Judy Case saying she plans to recuse herself from voting because of a conflict of interest, the challenge has

increased for mining proponents. They need to convince 3 of 4 supervisors to override the Planning Commission's rejection of the project.

What will the vote be?

I don't have the foggiest idea. Cemex could get the votes to begin a 100-acre operation that would mine and truck aggregate for at least 50 years. But it wouldn't surprise me, either, if the company is shut out. Opponents, in the least, have attracted the board's attention.

There will be testimony today about the plant creating jobs in a tough economy and the county needing aggregate to meet future demand. Proponents will say that without this mine aggregate must be shipped in, thus adding to the Valley's air pollution problem.

Opponents will counter that the plant will provide only a handful of full-time jobs and future demand for construction materials is exaggerated. They'll also point to the final Environmental Impact Report, which states that the project would produce significant and unavoidable air pollution.

For a look at what might happen, consider Riverside County, where Granite Construction of Watsonville proposed a 414-acre quarry.

The Board of Supervisors there leans conservative -- much like the board in Fresno -- and is looking for projects to jump-start the Inland Empire economy. But the Riverside board, on a 3-2 vote in February, turned down the project off Interstate 15 between Temecula and the San Diego County line.

The debate there had gone on for seven years. The Riverside County Planning Commission held six hearings totaling 52 hours, according to The Press-Enterprise of Riverside. Two hearings were held at the Riverside Convention Center to accommodate crowds of more than 2,000.

Pointing to how lucrative these mining projects can be: The proponent submitted plans for a smaller quarry at the same site on June 25, according to the Riverside County website.

I can't argue against the fact that Fresno County will need more aggregate and asphalt. It also makes sense to keep diesel truck trips as short as possible. But there are other mines proposed in the county that can meet future demand without having to rip apart Jesse Morrow Mountain.

The mine is a good idea, but it's in the wrong place.

Nothing else need be said.