

Comal residents protest newest rock plant

By Will Wright | Posted: Thursday, October 19, 2017 12:00 am



TCEQ 1.jpg

Comal County residents Lendon Gilpin, right, and Paul Wendell, left, line up to address state officials during the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality's public meeting Tuesday on permits for Anderson Columbia's plant expansion at Coyote Run and Old Nacogdoches Road.

Residents might have a beef with the company seeking to expand its current Comal County rock crushing operation – but they're really upset with the increasing numbers of similar plants springing up in the area.

On Tuesday, south Comal County residents expressed that fear and others during a public meeting on state permit requests by Anderson Columbia Co. Inc. (ACCI) for adjoining rock processing facilities on 1,000 acres bordering border Coyote Run and Old Nacogdoches Road.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality served as host to the two-hour meeting at Courtyard by Marriott-New Braunfels River Village. Florida-based ACCI seeks the permits — one for air quality, the other for a rock-crushing processor — for its Tejas Quarry just south of New Braunfels.

If both are granted, the company will be free to increase operations in what residents claim is an already overcrowded aggregate development area. ACCI's facilities and two others are planned within a 10-square-mile radius in the southeastern part of the county, which already totals seven aggregate-production plants or quarries.

“The TCEQ needs to carefully review all of these permits ... and all other aspects of what these companies bring into the area,” said Mark Friesenhahn, whose High Creek Road property is within close range of ACCI's plant. “You have the responsibility to consider not only the air quality, but all of the impacts they will have on water, light, noise and emissions.

“It's not just this plant — we need to have an area-wide model.”

ACCI's expanded operations would impact residences, farms and businesses along Old Nacogdoches Road (Farm-to-Market Road 1337) and Coyote Run, those on parts of Bunker Street, Krueger Canyon Road, Wald Road, Rusch Lane and Solms Road, and increase traffic on sections of FM 2252, FM 482 and FM 1863.

The usual concerns bother residents — that the plants would adversely impact air and water quality; create increased dust, soot and diesel fuel emissions; include blaring lights and around the clock noise; and increase traffic on narrow, two-lane roads already rife with transports to and from nearby concrete and asphalt plants.

Brad Patterson, TCEQ representative and meeting facilitator, said his agency could only address questions on his agency's air permitting process and how it monitors companies to comply with state and federal air quality standards.

TCEQ said ACCI's new permits would increase the plant's current releases of particulate emissions, which must remain within acceptable levels. However, residents wanted to

know exactly how the state measures the most dangerous, minute emissions, which the company is only required to monitor within 50 feet outside of operations.

On Tuesday, residents were astounded to learn that TCEQ's lone area air monitoring station was located in Selma — miles away from most Comal County plants.

“It’s all about pollution — air, water and noise — all of the things that come with all of these plants,” Bunker Street resident John Young said. “It’s all ruining lives — just for the sake of making a dollar.”

Scott Cleveland, ACCI environmental manager, and Melissa Fitts, Westward Environmental’s vice president of permitting and compliance, answered only a few questions about ACCI’s planned operations.

Cleveland said ACCI’s current TCEQ permit allows it to process 250 tons per hour, 12 hours a day for “five or six days a week.” He said the new permit would allow 24-hour processing up to seven days a week.

“That doesn’t mean we’re going to run it 24 hours a day,” he said, adding that could change depending on market demand.

“Right now, there’s a lot of demand for rock in Houston. A lot of these (area) quarries could be running 24/7 to try to keep up with that demand,” he said.

ACCI’s operations will border John Paul II Catholic High School and are also near Comal Independent School District’s new middle school currently under construction on Hubertus Road between FM 482 and Interstate 35.

“What protection are you giving to the school community?” resident Sharlene Fey asked. “There are school buses traveling on that road. Are there plans for road sweepers or anything to control the emissions and dust on the roads?”

TCEQ officials said residents could address concerns even after operations begin by requesting the agency conduct investigations. However, with so many plants springing up in such a short time, several residents requested TCEQ conduct a study on their area-wide effects on air, water and other issues.

District 73 State Rep. Kyle Biedermann helped arrange TCEQ’s gathering, which was closely monitored by Friends of Dry Comal Creek, opposed to Vulcan Construction Materials’ proposed 1,500-acre rock-crushing plant and quarry at the corner of State Highway 46 and FM 3009.

“I am pleased that the community concerns were able to be voiced,” Biedermann said on Wednesday. “I will be meeting with TCEQ in the coming weeks to discuss the community concerns.”

TCEQ recorded the public commentary portion of the meeting. Patterson said those comments — and others submitted in writing and online before Oct. 30 — would be considered as the process moves forward in the coming months.

TCEQ and ACCI officials referred to their home offices for comment. However, Schoenthal Road resident Michael Krause said changes in the permitting process needs to originate in the Texas Legislature.

“TCEQ has its hands tied by the legislature, because they can only monitor on part of this, but lots of other agencies need to be involved in this,” he said. “We need to look at addressing the legislature on the regulatory process — not just this particular company.”