

Quarry plan surprises, riles Comal County residents

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Photo: Edward A. Ornelas, Staff / San Antonio Express-News



People attend the Friends of Dry Comal Creek community awareness meeting held Thursday Oct. 5, 2017 at the Bulverde-Spring Branch Activity Center in Bulverde, TX. The meeting was on Vulcan Materials Company's ...
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BULVERDE — Area residents are raising numerous health and safety concerns about a rock quarry proposed for a tract of ranchland surrounded by residential subdivisions off Texas 46 in the Hill Country.

“We are not against development. We want it done in a safe process,” Sabrina Houser-Amaya said at a community meeting here Thursday night that drew nearly 200 people, including several Comal County officials.

Vulcan Materials, the firm that wants to open the quarry, was not invited to the briefing, but a spokesman said Friday that the company is committed to protecting water and air quality.

The quarry would be on 1,500 acres midway between New Braunfels and Bulverde, with 600 acres of that land serving as a buffer between the plant and the subdivisions. It came to light after Vulcan sought a state permit in June to process 1.5 million tons of limestone annually in a rock crusher at the site.

Friends of Dry Comal Creek, a grassroots group that is leading the opposition to the project and organized Thursday's meeting, has raised concerns over anticipated dust and fumes, traffic from trucks moving the rock, and fears about groundwater pollution. The site is over the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone.

There also are worries that shock waves from the blasting of rock will disrupt neighbors and damage houses, wells and groundwater formations.

Houser-Amaya, a member of Friends of Dry Comal Creek, said if residents can't stop the quarry from opening, they want to mitigate its impact as much as possible.

For their part, Vulcan officials are pledging to operate the facility in a safe and responsible manner.

"Our project will meet or exceed regulations and guidelines established by local, state and federal laws and regulatory agencies that preserve and protect air quality and local water resources," spokesman Scott Burnham said Friday.

Plans call for excavation to remain above the water table, he said, projecting the operation will require less groundwater than if residential development occurred on the parcel, located at the southwest corner of Texas 46 and FM 3009

"We expect to mine only about 50 acres in the first 10 years, and it will take up to 80 years to reach completion," he said, noting the more than 600 acres of undeveloped land that have been designated to serve as a buffer.

If the air quality permit is issued by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, he said, blasting would occur only once every couple of months, for a combined duration of less than 10 seconds, in the first year of operation.

The land was acquired for Vulcan in January by Blue Pine Holdings LLC from rancher Eric White, who says he expected it to be developed for residential use.

Before closing the deal, he said he asked the broker what was planned for the land but received no answer.

"I can understand why they didn't tell me what they were going to do, because I told them after the fact that I wouldn't have sold it for a quarry," said White, 87, who still lives on 132 acres he retained there.

"Everybody's against it, including me, but I don't think it's going to be near as bad as people think," he said, citing assurances he'd received from Vulcan officials. "They said, 'If you didn't look down there (into the quarry) you wouldn't know it was there.'"

That scenario contrasts sharply with the picture painted Thursday by Friends of Dry Comal Creek, which has solicited support for their fight against the permit from local, state and federal elected representatives, among others.

Several officials responded by asking the TCEQ to conduct a public meeting on the project.

“This area of Comal County is surrounded by established residential properties, subdivisions and some light commercial property,” County Commissioner Scott Haag, who was on hand Thursday, said in one such letter. “I have heard from many of the property owners in this area, and they are very upset and concerned.”

TCEQ spokesman Brian McGovern said Thursday, “The application is currently in technical review. A public meeting will be scheduled sometime after the technical review is complete.”

The agency is still accepting public comments on the project.

Counties have very limited authority to regulate land uses, opposition member Mike Zimmerman told the crowd, and the quarry site is outside the limits of any city, which have greater power through zoning.

“That makes it easy pickings for Vulcan ... to come in and set up shop,” he said.

Fellow member Ed Harris projected that 205 trucks hauling 20 tons each around-the-clock every day would be required to move the 1.5 million tons of rock listed in the permit request.

He puffed talcum powder into the air to demonstrate how particulate matter generated by a quarry would disperse over a wide zone. Describing dust-coated landscapes he’d seen at other quarries, he said, “The trees look like something in a Johnny Depp movie.”

Guest speaker Krystal Henagan recounted recurring family health problems that she linked to pollutants from quarries near Loop 1604 and O’Connor Road, including one run by Vulcan, where she’d moved in 2013.

After wind deposited an unidentified layer of sediment in her area that damaged vegetation and vehicles’ paint, she said, “we had blood coming out of our ears and noses.”

“They don’t really make a good-faith effort to protect their community,” Henagan, representing the national anti-pollution group Mom’s Clean Air Force, said of Vulcan. “Thank goodness we were able to move away shortly after that.”

Burnham said Vulcan will protect air quality using the “best available control technologies” and will utilize effective dust-control measures and recycle water at the site to minimize the impact on groundwater sources.

“We are committed to working with our neighbors, answering questions and being a responsible member of the community,” he said Friday.