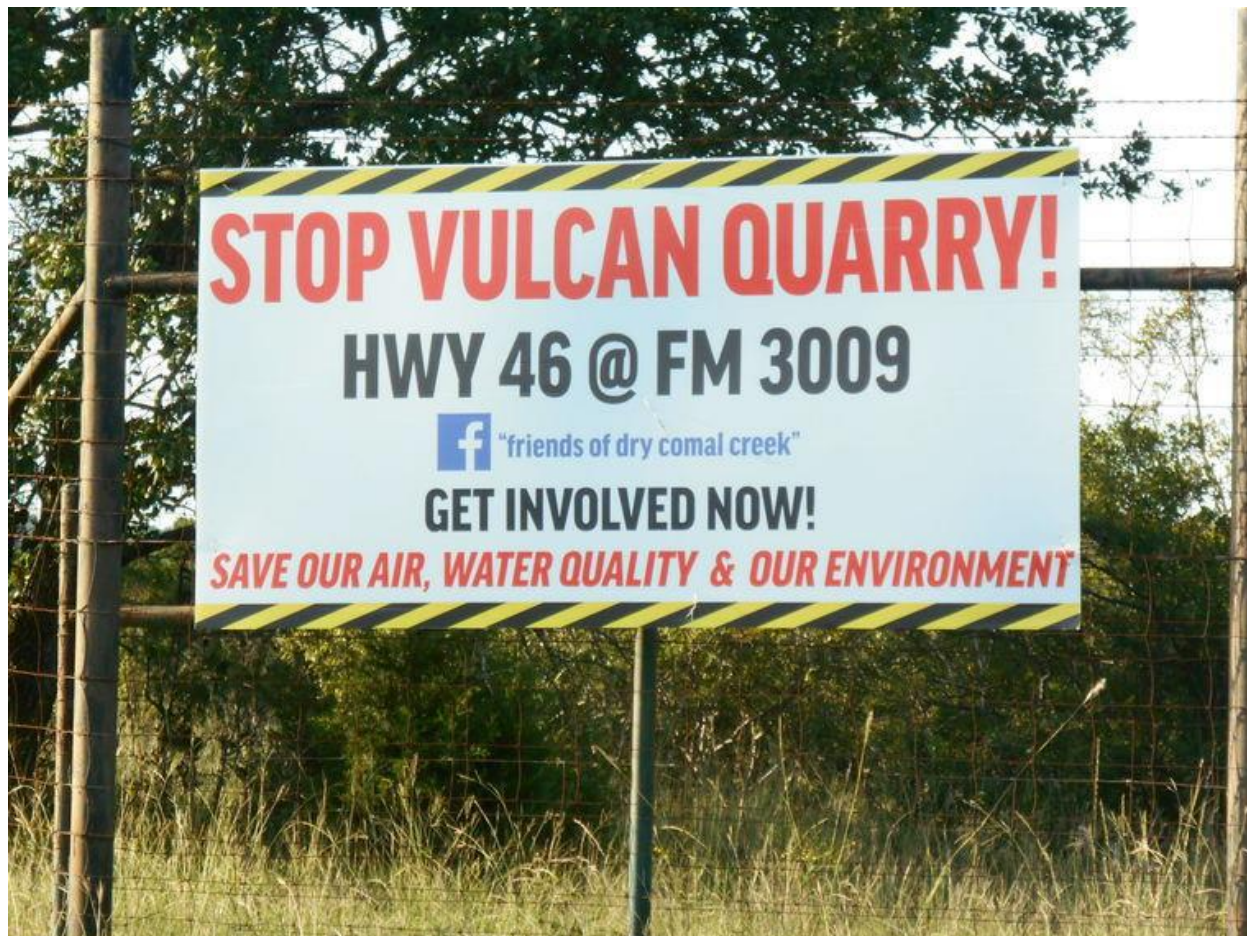


Quarry opponents prepare for battle

By Will Wright | Posted: Sunday, October 8, 2017 12:00 am



Stop Vulcan Quarry

A sign protesting the quarry calls for public involvement.

BULVERDE — Milann Guckian compares herself to Erin Brockovich, or as a David fighting an uphill battle against a Goliath.

“I’m not happy,” said Guckian, one of several residents opposed to Vulcan Construction Materials’ proposed rock-crushing plant at the corner of Highway 46 and Farm-to-Market Road 3009. “I’m going to fight this thing — and I’m going to be a pain in their butt.”

Guckian was one of several speakers featured at a community awareness meeting Thursday night at the Bulverde Spring Branch Activity Center in Bulverde. Friends of Dry Comal Creek, an organization opposed to Vulcan's limestone facility, served as host to the gathering that brought out more than 150 area residents.

Vulcan Materials is the nation's largest producer of construction aggregates, primarily crushed stone, sand and gravel, and a major producer of aggregates-based construction materials that include asphalt and ready-mixed concrete. The company's newest 1,500-acre site will be its second in the county.

"We are committed to investing in the future of Comal County and operating in a safe and responsible manner," Vulcan spokesperson Scott Burnham said. "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."

Vulcan has applied for an air quality permit required by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality before it can begin construction. Burnham said the permit is for a portable rock crusher, but admitted the site will eventually include a quarry.

Fighting that first permit is paramount, opponents said, as it will lead to others down the line.

"This quarry is vast and it is big," Sabrina Houser-Amaya said. "You can see the impact it will have from two miles, four miles and five miles away. About 6,000 residents will be within five miles of this quarry – which (TCEQ) will only monitor from its fence line."

Thursday's 2.5-hour presentation included statistics compiled by Friends of Dry Comal Creek – addressing adverse impacts the plant would have on air and water quality and property values. Many residents with homes in Vintage Oaks subdivisions would bear the brunt of the dust and particulates winds from the plant will bring into their neighborhoods.

Krystal Henagan used to live near a Vulcan plant in San Antonio. She became a field organizer for Moms Clean Air Force after seeing her 4-year-old son suffer through debilitating health.

"He was on seven medicines because of the exposure to dust particles, which spread throughout our home and got into his lungs and bloodstream," she said. "He had to leave the house just to catch his breath."

Vulcan said the project "is uniquely designed to fit within the existing landscape and topography." To protect residents, the facility will include 600-plus acres of buffer zones, setback and non-mining areas.

“We expect to mine only about 50 acres in the first 10 years, and it will take up to 80 years to reach completion,” Burnham said.

Burnham said blasting events would be rare and controlled.

“Typically, a blast will occur about once a week,” he said. “Since each blast will typically last less than one second, we anticipate between 8 and 10 seconds of total blasting in the first year, and about one minute of total annual blasting for years 5 through 10.

“It’s a controlled blast, set off electronically and monitored by equipment. While we understand the concerns, these are non-events. We also put neighbors on a list if they choose to be informed when it occurs.”

Mike Zimmerman, another plant opponent, said seven quarries, asphalt plants and similar facilities already exist in Comal County, with possibly four more on the way. Texas counties don’t have the zoning control that cities have over industrial projects. Vulcan’s new site is just beyond the extraterritorial jurisdictions of New Braunfels and Garden Ridge.

“These companies move here because Comal and Bexar counties have over 60 percent of limestone in Texas,” he said. “And because they move into unincorporated areas, there’s no ordinances for them to follow.”

Increased truck traffic — as many as 75,000 trucks per year — will come with Vulcan’s new facility. The company said locating to Highway 46 is a necessity as it will reduce Vulcan’s area truck travel and meet increasing market demand.

“After about six years of operation, we estimate approximately 13 trucks per hour during typical operations,” Burnham said. “The market is generating the truck traffic, and we’ll capture some of that, with reduced mileage.”

There’s not much governmental oversight over other concerns, such as diesel fume emissions, constant lights and noise, and the effects of blasting operations on home foundations, aquifers and watersheds.

However, Vulcan said it is committed to preserving and conserving water resources.

“Rock will be extracted from the upper surface above the aquifer water table; water will be recycled; and Trinity Aquifer water usage will be far less than a residential subdivision uses,” Burnham said.

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

Despite that, Vulcan is fighting neighborhood opposition to proposed plants in areas throughout the country, including spats in California, Tennessee and South Carolina.

“Look at Vulcan’s history,” Ed Harris said. “They haven’t put good-faith efforts into protecting the community.”

Not so, Vulcan stated.

“We’re no stranger to Texas or Comal County. We currently operate 15 quarries and several other facilities in Texas; our quarry on Loop 1604 (and Bulverde Road in northeast San Antonio) nearby started operations in 1971,” Burnham said.

“Our construction aggregates help grow and sustain communities, forming our roads, bridges, residential and commercial buildings, schools, hospitals and places of worship.” Vulcan and the Friends of Dry Comal Creek are prepared for a drawn-out battle that could last years. TCEQ representatives on Thursday confirmed Vulcan’s permit is still pending. No public hearings have yet been scheduled.

“We’re on top of this, and we’re going to make sure there are hearings,” District 73 State Rep. Kyle Biedermann said in August. “There are certain rules Vulcan has to follow, but there are certain things Vulcan can do in order to be a good neighbor.

“Those will come up in the hearings – and we’re going to support the residents in making sure the hearings are conducted properly and according to the rules.”

Harris urged residents to learn more about TCEQ’s public hearing process by attending the agency’s public hearing on an air permit for Anderson Columbia’s proposed limestone facility at Coyote Run and Old Nacogdoches Road at 7 p.m. Oct. 17 at Courtyard by Marriott-New Braunfels.

“Some might say this (plant) is a necessary evil,” Zimmerman said. “But it’s an evil that’s really not necessary.”

Point/Counterpoint

Vulcan Construction Materials is planning a rock crushing plant/quarry at the corner of State Highway 46 and Farm-to-Market Road 3009. The Friends of Dry Comal Creek is fighting Vulcan’s pending air quality permit before the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

Vulcan says it...

- Supplies aggregate-based products to hundreds of Comal County customers.
- Purchased more than \$1.73 million in goods and services from county-based businesses in 2016 and contracts with local vendors that employ local workers.
- Has many current and former employees living in the county, where it seeks to provide additional investment and jobs.
- Has facilities that meet or exceed standards set by local, state and federal regulatory agencies.
- Promises to follow air quality requirements, control emissions and ensure public health.
- Preserves and protects local water resources, aquifers and wells, recycles water, manages storm water runoff, and utilizes effective dust-control measures.

- Will work with Texas Department of Transportation to make FM 3009 improvements, maintain landscaped and vegetated buffers, and a paved entrance that ensure safety and traffic flow.
- Will maintain a 24/7 community line to respond to questions or concerns.
- Will participate in community events and support local organizations; develop education partnerships to support student learning.
- Will partner with local contractors, establish vendor relationships and provide economic opportunities.

Opponents fear the plant...

- Will cause health problems from high levels of emissions of carcinogenic particulate matter, diesel fumes from trucks and plant equipment, and dust suppression chemicals.
- Will create noise from 24-7 rock crushing and blasting operations.
- Will create dangerous traffic congestion on two-lane roadways.
- Will endanger the Edwards Aquifer Recharge Zone and Dry Comal Creek watershed.
- Will consume unregulated amounts of water from the Edwards and Trinity aquifers at the expense of wells owned by surrounding property owners.
- Will lead to falling property values and depressed area real estate sales.
- Blasting operations will destroy underground water venues, damage and/or destroy nearby water wells, home foundations, and existing infrastructure.
- Could lead to the threat of eminent domain and private property condemnations.
- Lead to additional railroad links and the destruction of existing roadways.
- Will further endanger area wildlife.

Sources: Vulcan Construction Materials; Friends of Dry Comal Creek