

Cottonwood sand mine up for a vote

Planning commission to weigh project Friday; county staff opposes it

BY BLAKE NELSON

UNION-TRIBUNE

EAST COUNTY — San Diego County staffers have recommended that leaders reject a proposed sand mine in East County that could pull out millions of tons of earth for years to come, a partial victory for residents who've long lobbied against the project.

The Cottonwood Sand Mine would cover more than 200 acres in the unincorporated Valle De Oro area, near Jamul, and has been working its way through the approval process since 2018.

The county planning commission is scheduled to finally consider the proposal at the end of the week.

Cottonwood could “have a harmful effect on desirable neighborhood character,” employees of the planning and development services department, or PDS, wrote in a report to the commissioners, and “the site would not be suitable for the proposed type of development.”

“Therefore, PDS recommends denial of the Project,” staffers added.

The land is owned by Michael Schlesinger, a Los Angeles-based developer who’s listed in public records as the point person for the limited liability company Cottonwood Cajon ES, which pitched the mine. “While we strongly disagree with staff’s recommendation, our team looks forward to demonstrating to the Planning Commission they can make all the relevant findings to support the project,” Schlesinger said in a statement sent by a spokesperson.

He argued that the mine had the potential to improve the environment, through new trails and the eventual creation of 150 acres of “permanent open space,” as well as benefit the economy. A “temporary, local source of essential construction sand will help offset skyrocketing costs for housing and infrastructure construction and create hundreds of high-quality jobs.”

All in all, Cottonwood would be “an extraordinary public benefit for the region,” Schlesinger added.

The planning commission will meet at 9 a.m. Friday in the County Operations Center’s hearing room. If commissioners reject the mine, the developer can appeal the decision to the Board of Supervisors.

One supervisor, Monica Montgomery Steppe, said as a candidate that she’d oppose the project.

The site at 3121 Willow Glen Drive was a golf course for decades, and photos show that much of the land is currently

covered in sepia-toned chaparral. The developer wants to dig holes up to 40 feet deep to extract around 4.3 million cubic yards of sand, according to county records. That material, which could be used to make cement, would often be carted off at a rate of 23 truck trips an hour.

The mine would be open most weekdays from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. and last a decade, followed by a two-year effort to re-cover the area with soil and plants.

A previous estimate found the project could bring in about \$40 million.

Staffers acknowledged that the county needs more construction material. The report was not overly worried about pollution, concluding that the mine's effect on the air quality would be "less than significant," and employees were similarly unconcerned about the threat of wildfire. There weren't a ton of plants to begin with, the report said, and as a result of new development, "flammable vegetation would be removed and the potential for onsite fire would diminish."

Yet a mine will nonetheless bring dust clouds, rumbling dump trucks and the smell of diesel, staffers wrote. Plus, the project probably wouldn't be a pretty sight for the schools and 150 or so suburban homes nearby. "Many of these homes were built around a golf course," the report said, "and residents assumed that they would be living near a quiet golf course."

These same issues have been raised by others for years. Dozens of people railed against the proposal during one public meeting in 2023 — opposition leaders say there have been a number of similar gatherings — and a nonprofit,

StopCottonwoodSandMine.org, is raising money to challenge the project. The group's long list of supporters reads like a Who's Who of East County leaders and includes the Sycuan Tribal Government, former County Supervisor Dianne Jacob and former La Mesa Councilmember Barry Jantz.

Jantz said that the Stop Cottonwood Sand Mine Committee will give a presentation to the commission on Friday and the group has been teaching residents how to publicly weigh in at the hearing.