

Critics howl at planned RV park

State takes no action at first public hearing

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Calling it "inappropriate" and "obscene," Santa Cruz County residents made it abundantly clear Tuesday that they don't want a giant park for recreational vehicles on the scenic north coast.

More than 250 people packed into Loudon Nelson Community Center to deliver four hours of scathing criticism of the RV park plan to the State Park and Recreation Commission in the first public hearing on the matter.

The park commission, a nine-member body of gubernatorial appointees, took no action on the proposed Wilder Quarry Campground, and several commissioners said they have questions and concerns.

Critics, who wore orange "Keep Wilder Wild" tags, ranged from local officials and necktie naturalists to surfers, students and flannel-clad Earth Firsters. They cheered and applauded each other as commission chairwoman Sarah Flores banged her gavel in a struggle to maintain order.

Size of plan criticized

"This is an incredibly bad and oversized plan that will be detrimental to the entire north coast," said Harold Short of Corralitos, a member of the county's North Coast Beaches Advisory Committee. "It seems to be creating a small town rather than a campground."

Michelle Stewart, wearing an Earth First! T-shirt, called the project "obscene."

The plan calls for Watsonville mining company Graniterock Inc. to give its 300-acre Wilder Sand Quarry to the state as part of the surrounding 4,500-acre Wilder Ranch State Park.

Lease-back plan

The company would lease back 100 acres of the quarry to develop a campground with 260 to 380 RV campsites, making it the largest RV campground in the state park system. The park would include a restaurant, store, heated pool, amphitheater, educational center, dormitory, event center and horseback riding areas. It would be given to the state after mining ceases in 30 years.

The state Department of Parks

See **RV PARK**, Page 4B

Residents protest planned RV park

■ RV PARK

from Page 1B

and Recreation, partners with Graniterock in the plan, says it will remove 265 previously planned campsites from the unspoiled coast area and concentrate camping in the mined-out quarry.

Park officials say the plan gives the state additional parkland it could not otherwise afford while allowing Graniterock to satisfy a state law that requires quarries to be left in a "usable" condition.

"We believe campgrounds are a good re-use of the mined property," said Bob Culbertson, chief state parks ranger for the Santa Cruz district.

A handful of speakers agreed.

"I think the area needs more recreational facilities of this type," said Steven Franich of Watsonville, adding over boos and hisses that he has done business with Graniterock for 30 years.

Supporters were drowned out by critics who say the project is too big and will choke Santa Cruz streets with tourist traffic while threatening wildlife and ruining a scenic area.

Santa Cruz High School junior Nathan Contos, 16, said the Wilder Park area "is one of the last remaining things we have in the midst of all the confusion of the city."

"The north coast is an attraction in itself," Contos said. "I can just look out at all the peacefulness and say, 'Oh, dude. It's so great.'"

County school board member Jeff Almquist challenged the claim that schoolchildren will benefit from the campground's education center.

"It simply wouldn't be a genuine environmental experience to put kids in the middle of an RV park and try to teach them about the environment," Almquist said.

Graniterock President Steve Woolpert, who sat quietly taking notes during the hearing, said afterward he was "glad they came and spoke so I could hear what's on their minds." He added that the project "is in the hands of the state parks department" and that changes are "really up to them."

Before the parks commission can act on the proposal, an environmental impact report on the plan must be redone to take into account the rare California red-legged frogs that live on the property. That isn't expected to be completed until spring.

Meanwhile, legal questions remain about whether the parks commission has the final say on the project. Lawyers for the California Coastal Commission say the county board of supervisors must approve it as well. Two of the five board members, Mardi Wormhoudt and Fred Keeley, spoke against the plan.