

County recommends go-ahead for Cemex quarry

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Planning Commission expected to rule on proposal next month

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BONNY DOON — County planners say a limestone quarry in the hills above Davenport, owned by material supply giant Cemex, could be expanded with little risk to local water supplies.

In a recent review of Cemex's long-proposed quarry expansion, the county concluded that precautions can be taken, like filtering the runoff from mines, to prevent contamination of an underground spring used by Santa Cruz for drinking water.

Cemex, which also runs the cement plant in Davenport, has sought for more than a decade to enlarge its 87-acre quarry by 17 acres. But environmental concerns, namely the fate of the city's

Liddell Spring, have slowed that effort.

The environmental impact report released this summer downplayed the possible threats.

"There are no significant unavoidable impacts," county planner David Carlson said in a presentation Tuesday before the Planning Commission.

The commission, which has final say over the expansion, is scheduled to make a decision Sept. 23.

Despite the county report, which considered years of studies by both Cemex and the Santa Cruz Water Department, city officials remain unconvinced that quarry expansion won't disturb their spring.

"It is irrefutable that the city has lost water production (because of mining)," city Water Director Bill Kocher said Tuesday.

Kocher says his experience suggests that more mining, which entails blasting on the ground above Liddell Spring, will only mean more contamination of groundwater and less clean water for the city.

The spring, which has provided drinking water for nearly a century, accounts for about 10 percent of the city's total supply.

Cemex officials don't deny that mining can cloud underground water with sediment, but they say the disturbance is "minute." Rainfall, they say, is a much greater cause of turbidity as are other

natural phenomena.

The county report recommends Cemex take several measures to reduce the flow of sediment — no matter what the source — should the company expand. Among the recommendations are installing drains in the quarry to capture and filter runoff as well as constantly monitor the underground water conditions. The report also says Cemex should pay for any losses the city Water Department might experience.

Planning Commissioner Rachel Dann on Tuesday asked for more specific benchmarks to gauge water contamination and called for more specific penalties should there be disturbances.

"The agreement (with Cemex)

has had so many problems in the past," she said.

Cemex's mining rights date to the '60s, though the county has final say over new development at the quarry.

The quarry's limestone is the primary material used to make cement at the nearby kilns. Cemex officials say the quarry can supply three to four more years' worth of limestone as is, but needs to expand after that.

The current economic climate has temporarily halted Cemex's cement operations, but officials say they intend to be up and running soon, though they have not provided a time line.

The Planning Commission has scheduled another study session on the expansion Sept. 9 and a final public hearing for Sept. 23.