

Our View

Quarry proposal not the right fit for Union County

The Union County Planning Commission decides Monday, March 22, on whether or not to approve the plan to allow a rock quarry to expand off Robbs Hill Road near Interstate 84. The site is about 2.5 miles from La Grande and a mile from the community of Perry.

The community, in short, has spoken against the quarry.

James Smejkal of Banks has applied to the county planning commission to develop a 250-plus acre quarry, including rock crushing and railroad transport facilities to ship 2,000 tons of rock a day for more than a hundred years. Perhaps as many as 20 people spoke during the planning commission's March 8 public hearing via telephone on the proposal to carve the quarry in an area locals use for recreation ranging from simple walks in the wilderness to huckleberry picking. Nearly all spoke out against the proposal.

They were concerned and even out-right worried the quarry would lead to pollution in the Grande Ronde River, ruin the air quality in nearby communities, and mar the landscape for anyone heading



Alex Wittwer/The Observer
Snow rests on the mountainside Tuesday, March 2, 2021, near the site of a proposed 250-acre quarry less than a mile from Perry off Interstate 84 in Union County.

east on Interstate 84. Some doubted the proposal could mitigate the sounds and other issues from blasting.

They are worried the project could lead to the closure of Robbs Hill Road. There's some debate on whether a railroad crossing there is actually private or public. The county is trying to resolve that.

Those in opposition also said they just did not see a good reason for the project that would create about half a dozen full-time, permanent local jobs.

The few who spoke in favor of the quarry were the people behind the project or associ-

ated with it, including Steve West.

West manages the Ponderosa Ranch near where the quarry would operate and said he is friends with Smejkal, who owns the ranch and quarry site property. West said he wants to buy and preserve the ranch's scenic beauty and wildlife habitat, especially for elk. For that to happen, the quarry needs to become a reality, he said, because the quarry would lead to a 4,700-acre conservation easement that would devalue the ranch. Otherwise, he said, the property is beyond his means to buy, and if there is no quarry, Smejkal,

ONLINE
To view the quarry application and staff report, visit this editorial online at www.lagrandeobserver.com.

who is 87, will eventually divide the land into 240-acre lots and sell those off, or whoever owns the property after him will. West said that would be the worst case for the area.

West could be right. Having a significant number of people living in that wilderness could increase dangers during fire season and turn the place into a big neighborhood.

But the quarry is a bad move as well, maybe worse. If this is really about preserving a big stretch of wilderness, the property owners could find ways to do that without a quarry.

The planning commission has to take into consideration community attitudes about this project. While there is not-in-my-backyardism here, it's with good reasons. The quarry proponents' assertion that such mining projects are under more scrutiny than ever seems a pill too big for anyone listening to the meeting to swallow. And some planning commissioners said the massive 400-page

application for the quarry still does not address some concerns.

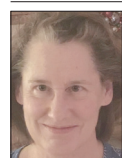
The Union County Planning Commission tabled its decision for the March 22 meeting and will resume its deliberation on the quarry at the top of the agenda when the meeting starts at 7 p.m. The commission no longer is taking public testimony on the quarry, but people can tune into the meeting and hear the outcome: call 253-215-8782 or 669-900-6833 and enter meeting identification number 957 9307 1503.

Yes, Union County and Northeast Oregon need jobs and development, but as several speakers last week pointed out, our wilderness is an economic engine that draws tourists and outdoor enthusiasts, and that is something we should invest in to grow our local economy.

The planning commissioners are sure to take all of those points and more into serious consideration. But the commission needs to be certain it's on good grounds to reject the application.

In spite of reassurances from the quarry proponents, we're sure the commission can find those grounds.

Viewpoints on sharing the wealth



ANNE MORRISON
THINKING OUT LOUD

My dad is in his 80s now, and when we talk, the conversation sometimes turns to topics of property, wills and inheritances.

I hope I've made my own position on these issues clear. My parents raised my four brothers and me. They fed, clothed and cared for us. They did their best to teach us right from wrong, until we each, in turn, turned 18. Honestly, I think that's all we should expect from them.

But wait. There's more! My parents also helped all of us financially through four years of college. To me, that seems like icing on the cake — something that was not required, but which I deeply appreciate, and which gave each of us, separately, a launching pad for life. Thanks in significant part to the help my parents provided early on, their children are now financially secure. In my opinion, none of us need more, and nothing more is owed us.

I also believe that — particularly in a culture where we are relentlessly pushed to believe that our very next purchase will be the one that finally provides contentment — it's critical to distinguish "want" from "need." That in a country and culture that thrives on the needless accumulation of material items, most of us have no real need for ever-larger houses or for a king-cab dually 1-ton pickup, and that perhaps the next worse thing after not having enough money may

be having too much money.

With these thoughts in mind, I've encouraged my dad to consider leaving any possible inheritance to people other than his children. There are all kinds of possibilities. There are the grandchildren, who might be able to use their own launching pad in life. There's the granddaughter who faces the possibility of overwhelming medical expenses in her future, and who really may need assistance to ensure the best possible quality of life. There's the soup kitchen at which my dad and stepmother volunteered weekly until the pandemic hit. There are many other groups and charities that represent my folks' values and interests.

Like so many families, there are other considerations. How will my stepmother be protected if my father passes first? We are a blended family, with stepsiblings, and some of us have received additional financial help at times when we were struggling — should those things be considered in dividing assets?

And there are yet other issues to consider.

Like so many families in America, my family has benefited significantly through generations from government programs that were never equally available to all. My ancestors received government land through the Homestead Act and the Hard Rock Mining Act.

Government assistance helped my grandparents through the Depression. In the same way that other families benefited from the GI Bill, government policies and programs enabled my parents to purchase houses in areas where real

estate values would inevitably rise.

Cumulatively through the decades, such programs allowed my family — generation-by-generation and bit-by-bit — to accumulate wealth that benefits us today, most significantly, in the form of education. My grandparents could afford college for both of my parents, enabling them to get better-paying jobs, making it possible for my brothers and me to receive college educations of our own. But such programs were never available on the same basis to all Americans. African Americans and other people of color were routinely excluded from such programs. Where my family was able to accumulate and pass along wealth, particularly in the form of education, many families of color were systematically denied similar opportunities.

History matters. Many people of color are statistically much poorer today than their white counterparts precisely because of such systemic, government-endorsed discrimination.

Does my father have an obligation to acknowledge such inequities by giving at least part of his wealth to groups or programs that might help redress the historical government policies that have unfairly benefited us?

My dad and I can spend a lot of time discussing issues like these.

I always tell him that I'm so glad these are his decisions to make, and not mine.

Anne Morrison is a La Grande resident and retired attorney who has lived in Union County since 2000. Thinking Out Loud is her monthly column for The Observer.

Letter to the editor

Oregon's River Democracy Act should be celebrated

Our family has lived in and loved Baker Valley since we settled here after World War II. My mom and dad built our family home, raised cattle and worked to support the community here. This wild and verdant country and the rivers that sustain it are what we have loved most about this place.

I was happy to join thousands of Oregonians in nominating local rivers for protection under Wyden's proposed "River Democracy Act." I know many friends and neighbors who did the same.

I understand concerns regarding new public lands protections but the facts don't support the most common fears. Read the bill, and you will find that Sen. Ron Wyden's visionary proposal does not affect private property rights, reduce access or stop grazing, logging or mining.

The bill does recognize the extraordinary value of our wild, life-giving rivers, which are also our most valuable long-term resource. Like all groundbreaking proposals, successful implementation requires thoughtful planning and local engagement throughout the process.

I urge you to stay tuned and stay involved. Protecting this resource is not a land grab, rather it is passing on to future generations what was passed on to us. It preserves what makes our part of the world so special. I can think of no better way to honor the legacy of those who have gone before us and ensure a vibrant future for those who will follow us.

*Robin Coen
Baker City*

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