

## **Sunny Valley gravel hearing pulls in a packed house**

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By Jeff Duewel of the Daily Courier

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The first hearing for a proposed sand and gravel operation in Sunny Valley drew a packed crowd pro and con Monday night in front of the Josephine County Planning Commission.

With emotions running high, the commission continued the meeting to May 12 without deciding if the project met significant site status for aggregate mines.

Sunny Valley Sand and Gravel submitted a 1,400-page application in March, and hopes to mine up to 6 million cubic yards of aggregate and employ up to 20 people in a 20-year plan.

Company president Andreas Blech opened by saying, "I ask you to look at our application on its merits, and look at the conclusion that jobs are the answer in Josephine County."

Throughout the three-hour meeting at the Anne Basker Auditorium, commission Chairman David Church attempted to limit comments to the amount and quality of aggregate, as upcoming hearings will deal with water, noise, dust and other issues.

But plenty of opinions were aired over other issues, along with some rancor over the process.

"Of all the supporters of the mine, none of them live in Sunny Valley," said Ron Baxter, who lives near the proposed site covering 200 acres near the confluence of Shanks Creek and Grave Creek, a large tributary of the Rogue River.

"I would suggest to the county we need this ... and the jobs that flow from exploitation of resources, not just at this site," said Jack Swift, a candidate for county commissioner and longtime proponent of natural resource use.

Project geologist Dorian Cooper said two drill holes and 17 trenches up to 33 feet deep indicated the site had a conservative estimate of 6.9 million tons, well over the 500,000 tons required for a significant site that would result in a zoning change. She also reported it met standards for hardness, air degradation and corrosion and added that mining would not come close to a buried gas line through the property.

But Michael James, consulting geologist from Eugene, said Cooper hadn't done enough to determine the quality or volume of rock. He's concerned about gaps in bore samples and that a landslide area within a mile contributed uneven rock size to the site.

"We're dealing with a debris flow as well as alluvium, and to me there are signs of higher quantities of silt," James said. "We don't really know the dimensions of the bottom of the deposit. The picture needs to be more complete."

"I've done 14 or 15 of these, and we've done enough trenches and bore holes," Cooper countered.

Steve Rouse, representing land-use watchdog Rogue Advocates and the water and fish advocate Rogue Riverkeeper, brought up his own bombshell. He said he dug up the original sale document of the property from 1869 and that it shows the United States reserved the mineral estate in the original federal land grant under the Morrill Act of 1862.

"It's pretty straightforward: the U.S. owns the mineral rights," Rouse asserted, adding "Josephine County has no authority to grant a mining request."

Blech said afterward "the law is clear" that he owns the mineral rights, and that it won't be a stumbling block for the project.

When asked what the planning commission would do in light of this, Church said. "It's a question outside of our purview right now. I don't know if I'll have an answer for that."