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Public Hearing on Proposed Quarry in Big Stone County Draws Large Crowd in Clinton

Clinton MN -- Doors opened for a full house at the Big Stone County planning commission's public hearing held Thursday evening January 5, 2012 at 7:30 p.m. in Clinton, Minnesota. Approximately 76 citizens met to hear and comment on the Strata Corporation's request for a Conditional Use Permit to build a new quarry to mine the granite stone outcrops on 102 acres of privately leased-land southeast of Ortonville. Strata Corporation executives presented their plans for an hour and forty-five minutes, followed by nearly two hours of public comment. Fifteen citizens spoke against granting the permit citing concerns related to the environment, preservation of the area's scenic and unique features, health, landowner issues, reduction in property values, and the negative impact to the local economy. No one voiced support for the project. The proposed quarry would be the third mining quarry in the land adjacent to the Minnesota River and surrounding the Big Stone National Wildlife refuge just south of Ortonville.

The hearing began with Strata's New Projects Coordinator, Bill LaFond, and colleagues who presented the case for the need for granite and aggregate resources to make concrete and infrastructure road enhancements in order to service their customers. Strata Corporation, a private company headquartered in Grand Forks, N. Dakota, has been leasing the land and developing the Big Stone Quarry Project since 2006. An extensive review of environmental, design and ammunition considerations included plans for building three granite quarries over the course of the next 80 - 130 years, new railroad tracks, a possible railcar loadout building, two new service roads, two drainage crossings, an overland conveyor line, a gravel access road connecting to County Road 17, and land designated for a shop and office building.

The area impacted is 102 acres of granite outcrop scenic and pastoral land located between the Minnesota River on the west, the Big Stone National Wildlife Refuge to the south, the Cold Spring Granite Quarry and private pastureland to the east, and the BNSF Railway and Highway 75 to the north.

In addition to this land, and in exchange for the use of it, Strata will pay Big Stone County an estimated \$20,000 a year in taxes to be paid as an extraction royalty based on the amount of aggregate mined and shipped. Strata will also set aside 59 acres to preserve a rare ball cactus and other rare plant species. To date, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has not committed to managing this land.

Public commentary touched on many concerns. A common theme expressed among many of those who testified was a deep concern to preserve the natural resources and unique features of the land.

Attorney Brian Wojtalewicz of Appleton Minnesota, commented on the rich legacy of land that can be preserved to pass on through the years with its granite outcrops, beautiful scenery and rare species.

“Does it really make sense to let them rip this out for profits of a few people, just to make concrete with it?” Wojtalewicz asked.

Neighboring landowner, Shawn May, expressed concern that the land to be mined will not protect 130 specimens of an endangered species that grows exclusively in this part of the Minnesota River valley, including the ball cactus, as well as 76 specimens of a Minnesota species of special concern, like the water hyssop. In the protected 59 acres, he questioned whether the unique habitat provided by shallow ponds in the granite outcrops could be protected from the silica dust in the wind.

May and several citizens suggested that an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) be implemented by Big Stone County given some of these concerns.

Landowner, Arlen Geise, inquired about how the project would impact his sixteen foot deep well. Other citizens shared similar well concerns.

Nancy Aune and Kathy Longhenry expressed concern for potential loss of water in their stock ponds and the prevention of effective access to their pasturelands for their cows. Longhenry lives on Highway 75, near the southern end of the proposed mining operations. She shares her neighbors’ concerns that the mine will change the beautiful vista and open space they have cherished for so long.

Homeowner Gene Homan, who lives along the property expressed a concern for declining property values and referenced comparable declining property assessments associated with other quarries. Cattle feedlot owner, Clark Mastell, who leases the land from the same private owner adjacent to the property designated for mining, relayed that this Big Stone Quarry Project will change an entire way of life for him.

Big Stone County tax-payer, Don Robertson, relayed concern that there were only nine working days in order for the public to prepare a response on a decision that will have an irreversible impact on the landscape. Other relayed concerns included the structural impact of the local dam, the decrease in expected tourism and the health risk for nearby citizens from the silica dust.

Status and Next Steps

Currently, the land is zoned as an Agricultural and Open Space district. Strata completed a mandatory Environmental Assessment Worksheet (EAW) to explore the potential for significant environmental effects. An Environmental Impact Study (EIS) has not been required. Public citizens did request that an EIS be ordered. If the conditional use permit is granted, the Big Stone County Planning commission will then pass this to the County Commissioners where a 4/5th consensus is required to approve the conditional use permit for Strata. At the close of the meeting on Thursday, members of the commission suggested that more time be taken to review the issues and concerns raised by the public.

According to Darren Wilke, Big Stone County’s Environmental Officer,
“On February 2nd, there will be a planning commission meeting that is open to the public. This meeting is not a public hearing but further information will be provided from Strata or citizens who are considered to have expertise or relevant knowledge when questioned by commission members.”

At the end of this meeting, according to Wilke, the options are to continue the meeting to a later date, or make a recommendation to the county board of commissioners to approve or deny the request for the Conditional Use Permit.

The next meeting of the planning commission will be held at the Clinton Memorial building on February 2nd at 7:30 p.m. Since the meeting was continued and not tabled, it is not expected that an announcement or notice will be sent to local newspapers.

Statutory timelines request a decision be made by 60 days.

The importance for environmental vitality and protection of this surrounding area has recently been recognized by two national entities. The Upper Minnesota River Valley, from approximately the headwaters at Big Stone Lake to the Fort Ridgely area, was recently designated by the U.S. Department of Interior as a National Blueway. This designation serves to connect communities, landscapes, and people to the outdoors through recreation as well as protect land and water resources rich in history and ecological importance. In addition, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has authorized Marsh Lake in the upper reaches of the Lac qui Parle reservoir in Lac qui Parle, Swift and Big Stone counties as a pilot site for ecosystem restoration. In the same regard, the Army Corps of Engineers is also exploring the restoration of the original Whetstone River near this quarry project.

For more information, please go to the executive summary submitted to Big Stone County in late December, 2011 at Big Stone County's website:

<http://www.bigstonecounty.org/environmental/publichearing/StrataExecutiveSummary.pdf>.

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For photographs relating to this story, visit:

<http://www.queenanproductions.com/blog/2012/01/11/taken-for-granite/>