

**Friday, September 16, 2005**

Last modified Thursday, September 15, 2005 12:04 AM PDT

Escondido council paves way for asphalt plant

By: DAVID FRIED - Staff Writer

ESCONDIDO ---- Citing a dire need for the material, the Escondido City Council on Wednesday unanimously agreed to allow a local asphalt recycler to break into the asphalt production business.

The decision was a stark contrast to the last time the council considered a proposal for an asphalt operation in the same area two years ago.

George Weir, owner of Escondido Sand & Gravel, said the plans to expand his existing recycling operations to produce asphalt would help meet Escondido's pavement needs in an increasingly tight market.

"We are proposing a local plant for local needs," Weir said, adding that his project was the "antithesis" of one Vulcan Materials Co. proposed in 2003.

Weir plans to begin production later this year at the same 3.72-acre site as his mobile asphalt recycling facility at 500 N. Tulip St., in the city's industrial zone.

As approved, Weir's operations would include a 40-foot silo and would produce approximately 500 tons of asphalt a day --- with a maximum of 150,000 tons a year. The plant would add about 35 trucks a day to Escondido's roads.

However, the production plant would also be mobile, and an Air Pollution Control District permit issued this week allows Weir to operate the plant anywhere in the county.

That agency's approval was enough to convince Councilman Ed Gallo, Vulcan's proposal based on air quality and traffic concerns

"The (district) would not approve something if it didn't meet all the standards," Gallo said.

In contrast to Weir's project, Vulcan's plant would have produced as much as 3,200 tons of asphalt daily and brought an additional 300 trucks to the city's roads each day.

And whereas nearly 80 people showed up to protest Vulcan's proposal, most of the dozen or so speakers Wednesday favored Weir's plant and his character as businessman.

"He goes the second mile," said Dan Fauchier, public works liaison for the San Diego Engineering and General Contractors Association. "He does things right."

Councilman Ron Newman, who swatted down Vulcan's project in a 3-2 vote, said he never imagined he would have to consider approving another plant.

But he said the need for local asphalt was not going away, and that over time, "you realize this is probably the smallest plant that the council is going to have the opportunity to approve for the city."

Not everyone spoke in approval of Weir's plant.

Carl Wigman, who opposed the Vulcan plant as well, said he had hoped the city was done with asphalt plant proposals.

"Surely the benefits the city would receive on the current proposal would not offset the impure air and additional traffic it would generate," he said.

Jan Cortez, of the local chapter of the American Lung Association, said that while she was not familiar with Weir's proposal, Escondido's overall air quality was poor and would only worsen with continued growth.

Asphalt production involves combining a heated mix of stone, sand and recycled asphalt with a petroleum-based asphalt cement. Emissions from asphalt production are the same as those produced by power plants, including nitrogen oxide, carbon monoxide, reactive organic gases, and oxides of sulfur and lead.

Escondido limits nitrogen oxide emissions to 55 pounds per day from any commercial project, well below the regional air pollution district's threshold of 250 pounds.

With the addition of the asphalt factory, Weir's entire operation on Tulip Street would produce 43 pounds of nitrogen oxide each day, according to an environmental study prepared for the project.

Weir's plant will be just one of two asphalt operations in North County, following the closure earlier this year of one of the region's largest plant, which produced 300,000 tons a year and was located on the Pala Indian Reservation.

London-based Hanson Aggregate operates an asphalt plant near Cal State University San Marcos that produces 380,000 tons a year. The permit for that facility expires in 2008.

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