

June 2, 2005

Three Groups Unite to Create Sunol Vision

By Ron McNicoll

Tired of making a piecemeal defense of the Sunol Valley against what they consider attacks on the environment by outside plans, three organizations have formed a coalition to better resist development they don't want, and create a vision of what they do want in Sunol's future.

Two longtime groups, Save Our Sunol (SOS) and the Alameda Creek Alliance (ACA), are being joined by a newer one, Stop the Dump in Sunol (SDS).

The SDS was formed last year in response to Alameda County's application for a compost facility near Andrade Road, at the south end of the Sunol Valley. Preserve Area Ridgeland Committee (PARC) is also expected to be invited into the coalition.

Neil Davies, vice president of SOS, told the Independent that the coalition has two purposes. "The first is to provide a forum in which to review the ultimate intensity of the impacts that will occur in the Sunol Valley. SOS has been trying to prevent the quarry from going in. It has been a struggle for more than 15 years," said Davies.

Although SOS lost a lawsuit when courts last year upheld the validity of Mission Valley Rock's mining permit, that fight isn't over yet, said Davies. There are other grounds, having to do with Measure D requirements about issuance of all relevant permits. They haven't been issued, and they won't be legitimate, Davies contended. SOS will be working with an attorney on further action, he said.

As for the coalition, Davis said that residents south of Interstate 680 are concerned about the compost facility, which he termed a dump, because food scraps and building materials will be part of the compost mix. Also, residents on Welch Creek Road are troubled by the 680-acre Apperson quarry.

The ACA is concerned about the impacts that the quarries will have on the waters of Alameda Creek. Since their organizing meeting recently, all parties concerned have obtained a better idea of the cumulative impacts of all of the projects, including effects on water, air quality and traffic, said Davies.

In a more positive direction, the coalition wants to create a vision for Sunol that it can take to county planners. It would eschew what Davies said is the industrialization of the valley, and keep it to its residential and rural character. Davies said it isn't clear yet what vehicle could be used to implement that vision.

Jeff Miller, spokesman for ACA, said that one possibility being explored is to look into an initiative or referendum process to try to protect the Sunol Valley. "Measure D (the county's open space protection ordinance) doesn't do it all," said Miller. Another idea for preservation is the creation of a land conservancy. So far these are just ideas that are being discussed, Miller said.

Gil Peters, member of SDS, said that SDS provided the impetus to form the coalition. "We have been talking about it for some time. It seems that Sunol is a dumping ground for all of these half-baked ideas that put industry here. A lot of people in the county believe Sunol is industrial. It isn't. It is agricultural and residential. They see a quarry, and think it's a big hole in the ground. There is more to Sunol than people realize. It has some of the richest growing soil," said Peters.

"Since we are not a city, we are all subject to the whim of the county," added Peters. "We're such a small voting group that the Board of Supervisors doesn't pay a lot of attention to us."

There has even been talk by some people about Sunol becoming a city to control its own planning destiny, said Peters. "Our tax base is considerable, if you take into consideration the Foothill Road district, and the development going in along Highway 84 near the GE plant," he said.

Peters pointed out that in the past, there had been rumors about south Valley residents wanting to build subdivisions, with Fremont coming over the hill. However, he said that was not true, and was based on misinformation.

SOS, the oldest group in the coalition, was formed in 1991. It is a descendant of Sunol Citizens Organized Regarding the Environment (SCORE), which was established in 1974. It successfully prevented housing tracts from being built on top of the Sunol-Pleasanton Ridge.

The group also opposed the Apperson quarry, which was approved by the county in 1983. Since the approval, habitat for such endangered species as the Alameda whipsnake and the red-legged frog have been found on the property, says the release.

The ACA was formed in 1997 after steelhead trout in the central California coast were listed as a federally threatened species. ACA is trying to help restore salmon and steelhead trout to Alameda Creek and the Sunol Valley, so it is concerned about gravel mining and any other development that would affect the watershed.

ACA also wants the county to reopen the environmental review process for Apperson quarry, because of the discovery of the listed species since the quarry was approved. The county has refused to do so.

SDS wants the county to drop its application to build the compost facility in Sunol. The group says that the tons of rotting food and other materials that will be part of the compost heap will give off unhealthy ammonia odors, and a bad odor that will annoy the neighbors and lower their property values. Several doctors told the authority at a hearing that there could be a danger of aspergillus, a serious illness, from decaying food.

The solid waste management authority, applicant for the permit, quarrels with the critics' description of the facility as a dump. The authority says that the facility would take grass clippings, branches and other materials, as well as food scraps. The authority has said that the compost facility would be convenient for county homeowners and businesses, such as nurseries, that want to buy compost.

The applicant contends that a properly regulated facility won't be a problem for neighbors.