Public Debate on AMI’s Drilling Dominates Town Council Meeting

By Ann Katzenbach and Donna Reibslager

It seems that the town of Patagonia has agreed to disagree and move forward, knowing that exploratory drilling is taking place and that real mining may come, and that they must work together so that the town isn’t torn apart. There are certainly committed factions in town—that was clear at the last town council meeting on October 26.

Don Taylor, Chief Operating Officer for Arizona Mining Inc. (AMI) explained to a full chamber what AMI is up to. We’ve listed those facts on the next page.

Fred Sang started public comment by saying that jobs are critical to the town. He said the council needed to work with AMI. “Otherwise they’re going to go somewhere else and then all we’re going to be is this little town that dies.”

Some minutes later, newly elected council member, Ron Reibslager, said that no one knows what is going on at the drilling site. He said he asked Brent Bowdon to go up and tour the site so that he could enlighten the public and stop a lot of speculation. He said Bowdon told him, “No,” because of insurance and safety concerns. Then Reibslager recounted driving up Harshaw Road and stopping where the road runs through the middle of AMI’s private property. He said a security team accosted him, told him he could not stop on private property and “verbally accosted me.” Taylor responded by saying the road situation “will be fixed tomorrow.” He stressed, however, the importance of both secrecy and safety at the site.

As for the water treatment plant that AMI has taken responsibility for, Taylor said that a pilot project had proven successful, was approved, and AMI was starting construction of a full-scale facility.

Fred Sang spoke again, reiterating his belief: “This town’s going to die.”

Reibslager countered by saying that most businesses in town were doing well. This was backed up by Carolyn Shafer who said sales tax revenue has increased 421% in real dollars since mining activities ceased in 1965. In addition, the town’s population has grown by 69%. Councilperson Andy Wood said that Gathering Grounds was doing well, that the café supported several families. But later, Bob Ollerton who owns the Plaza de Patagonia, backed Sang up, saying his businesses were having a hard time financially. The issue of dark skies brought the evening’s most passionate outcry. Cliff Hirsch described how the light and noise from AMI’s drilling are impossible to shut out at night. He said it was hard to sleep. He said there were no screens on the lights. “It’s like Yankee Stadium!” he declared. Taylor responded that all regulations had been complied with.

Ron Pulliam, who heads up Borderlands, said that he hoped the discourse about mining in Patagonia would be civil. “All the truth and wisdom in not in one camp, but as much as you want this mine here, that’s how much some of us oppose it.” Councilperson Melissa Murrietta spoke up twice in an effort to stop everyone talking at once, but it was Mayor Isakson who had the gavel, and he let most disagreements go unchecked. By and large, people seemed to agree that, despite some rough patches, the meeting had provided information and given people a chance to air their views.

As the meeting wound down, Andy Wood suggested forming a committee to talk through some of the questions and divergent points of views. She suggested that there be meetings outside of regular scheduled council meetings—meetings that are well publicized and focused on one or two topics of concern, with viewpoints from both ends of the spectrum.

Resident Bob Brandt champions an “economic development committee,” noting that the economy is an underlying source of disagreement.

Whatever the next step may be, most people seem to agree that the town should move forward in a thoughtful way with the overarching question of mining.
Forest Service Issues Scoping Notice For Taylor Project

Late this summer American Mining (AMI) submitted a plan of operation to the Forest Service, proposing to extend their drilling onto public land. The Forest Service issued a Scoping Notice to the public in September asking for citizen comments. On its website, the Forest Service explains: “Citizens often have valuable information about places and resources that they value and the potential environmental, social, and economic effects that proposed federal actions may have on those places and resources. NEPA’s requirements provide you the means to work with the agencies so they can take your information into account.”

The comments had to be submitted by October 11. According to Forest Ranger, Daisy Kinsey, there are “a lot of comments” and a “decision is many months out.”

If, after reading the public comments, the Forest Service decides “there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action,” they will issue a “categorical exclusion” and AMI’s proposed drilling on public land will go ahead. If, however, there are found to be significant environmental impacts, they will ask for an Environmental Assessment (EA) or an even more detailed Environmental Impact Study (EIS).

Here are some of the comments published on the Forest Service Website:

“Because of AMI’s existing drilling over the summer the main housing in town, the hotel, was filled up with mine workers. As was most of a new trailer park. Where will tourists and other visitors like hunters stay if there are even more miners in town for longer periods?”

“The sustainable tourism jobs will be lost forever if our public lands are permanently destroyed by mining. In 2008, visitor spending in Santa Cruz County, (cont. on next page)