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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

"The council needs to work with AMI. Otherwise they're going to go somewhere else and then we're going to be is this little town that dies."

middle of AMI's private property. He said a security team accosted him, told him he could not to 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

"There is much speculation because no one knows what is going on at the drilling site"

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.

"As much as you want this mine here, that's how much some of us oppose it."

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.

PRT

MISSION STATEMENT

To publish a nonprofit community newspaper which serves the Mountain Empire communities of Santa Cruz County—including Canelo, Elgin, Patagonia, and Sonoita—and which is open to all views, highlighting local issues and emphasizing the contributions of local talent.

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The Facts As We Know Them

There has been speculation from residents as to the nature and scope of AMI's current mining operations in the Patagonia Mountains. Here are the facts that we have been able to establish. Some we know from experience, some come from AMI's website, and some from Don Taylor's presentation to the council.

- Arizona Mining Inc. is a Canadian corporation that does exploratory mining. It finds underground ore deposits, maps them, and usually sells the rights and the land to a mining company.

- AMI currently owns 17,000+ acres of land that includes their original patented Hermosa Mine and the land they acquired from the state of Arizona in exchange for mitigating the leakage from the old Trench Mine.

- To date, AMI has drilled 270 holes on their property, finding where ore pockets are located. These ore samples come from 3,000 to 5,000 feet deep in the earth. AMI has referred to this as a "world-class mineral deposit."

- Using a generator to provide electricity, AMI currently has 15 drill rigs working 24 hours a day, seven days a week with an eight-day break for drill-

ers every three weeks. They are able to do this because mining activity in Arizona is exempt from restrictive noise and light ordinances.

- The drilling site is serviced by fuel trucks, water trucks, portable toilet trucks, heavy construction trucks, and assorted delivery trucks with water tanks, pipe, etc., which access the site by way of Harshaw Road, a narrow road with no shoulders.

- There are approximately 30 pickup trucks involved in this phase of drilling that started last spring.

- AMI has spent more than \$60 million dollars so far on this project. On their website they say, "We will continue the aggressive drill program already in place at least through the end of 2016."

- There are armed security guards on AMI's property and cars that stop on Harshaw Road as it passes through their property, are told to "move on." Don Taylor said at the October 26 meeting that this harassment would stop.

- According to Taylor, wells on the AMI property are providing enough water for the project. He says if mining negatively impacts Patagonia's water supply, AMI is willing to take

part in a comprehensive water study done by a third party, if necessary. He added that they also have the option of piping water to their operations from "a ranch to the east."

- AMI employs 200 people for the Taylor Deposit project. Drillers are living in trailers and rented housing. Some have had to find accommodations in Nogales.

- AMI's remediation work at the Trench Mine is moving ahead. Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ) has approved plans for a passive water treatment plant on the property, which is just beginning to get underway. This construction will mean more heavy machinery going to and coming from the site.

- It will be many months before economic and engineering assessments are made. Permitting can take anywhere from two to six years.

For those who oppose the drilling, as well as those who are in favor, the next important marker is the outcome of the scoping comments. Based on this, AMI will either move forward, or be required to submit an EA or EIS to establish whether its plan of operations will adversely affect the environment.

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)