



Rosemont mediator backs out of process

Just a month after starting, copper mine effort crumbles

By Tony Davis
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The controversy over the proposed Rosemont Mine has proved too hot to mediate.

An effort to create a public “working group” to analyze the copper mine’s environmental effects has collapsed before the group could get started.

Carie Fox, a professional mediator hired to organize the group, announced last week that she’s backing out, barely a month after she began organizing for it and before members were appointed.

Causes of the implosion are in dispute. But interviews with many who participated in trying to draw up the group make it clear that the hotly disputed nature of the mine slated for the Santa Rita Mountains south of Tucson made prospects for mediation tenuous at best.

The group would have consisted of environmentalists and other interest group activists, unaffiliated citizens and mining company officials, among others. It was to provide a forum to focus concerns about the mine to help the federal government prepare a detailed environmental impact statement

for it.

Some participants in organizational efforts had hoped the group would let them play a greater role in the lengthy process used by the U.S. Forest Service to analyze the mine’s effects and make a decision. Fox ran a number of organizational meetings, drawing 130 people total, plus held a major get-together on Nov. 13 that drew 120 people to Vail High School.

But in an interview, Fox, from Portland, Ore., said the intensity of people’s feelings about the mine made it unlikely that the group could successfully focus on its appointed tasks: to analyze thousands of public comments about the mine and give the Forest Service alternatives to study.

“They would never be able to focus on the process when they were also focusing on litigation and legislation,” Fox said. “It sucks to say ‘no.’ But what would have been much worse would be to say ‘yes’ and to drag people through a process that had fundamental, structural problems.”

Usually, Fox’s job as a mediator in other places has been to try and find consensus. That wasn’t

possible here, partly because the overwhelming majority of people interested in the working group were opposed to the mine and partly because the dispute couldn’t be mediated, she said.

“It’s a zero-sum game. I’m not going to bring people to the table to talk about the color of the lights or to talk about half a mine,” said Fox.

“We were trying to focus on the process toward the EIS. But doing that, it’s like you talk to your doctor and he says, ‘Let’s not talk about whether you live or die. Let’s talk about whether you get the X-rays right.’”

The group’s creation was suggested last March by U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, a Tucson Democrat. The Forest Service got started in the fall when it invited the Tucson-based U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution to organize the group, at a cost of \$140,400. The institute is part of the Morris K. Udall Foundation, an independent agency overseen by trustees appointed by the president.

Giffords is “deeply disappointed” at the effort’s failure, said her spokesman, C.J. Karamargin. She felt the institute’s experience and

credibility would have helped ensure meaningful public involvement with the environmental analysis, he said.

“A full and open exchange of views has been the congresswoman’s top priority since plans for the mine first became known. She believes the public must have a seat at the table during any discussion involving public land and a public agency,” Karamargin said.

Sandy Whitehouse, a Corona de Tucson activist, and Jim Pepper, a Sonoita activist, both Rosemont opponents, were also strongly disappointed at the working group’s failure.

“It was tragic that we were deprived of an inroad into this process,” said Whitehouse. “As long as we had the institute involved and the process for people to get involved with, we had a rope to hang onto and we could keep the momentum going.”

Whitehouse blamed environmentalists in part for the group’s dissolution. Some felt the whole working group was just a Forest Service ploy to keep citizens placated, while others focused on “the bunnies and the bees” that would be affected instead of the environmental impact statement, she said.

“This process was not supposed to be about expressing views on their opposition to the mine,” Whitehouse said. “But every time you have a meeting, you have 20 new people there who want to discuss all of their reasons for being opposed to the mine.”

Pepper said the process was too

oriented toward “trying to get people with disparate interests to somehow collaborate and reach some kind of consensus. I’m not sure that is what a public oversight group should have been created for.”

Environmentalists Randy Serraglio and Gayle Hartmann said they had tried to make the process work and thought the working group could have been effective if run properly. Serraglio noted that after the Nov. 13 meeting, he sent Fox an e-mail saying he believed the group could be valuable, but that its planned approach of analyzing thousands of detailed comments on the mine over the holidays wasn’t workable.

Serraglio pointed to Fox’s statement announcing her departure, in which she said she didn’t feel there was “a stable space for collaborative dialogue,” as a sign the mediator wasn’t heading in the right direction.

“We were not looking to collaborate with proponents of the mine,” said Serraglio, of the environmentalist Center for Biological Diversity. “We wanted to weigh in on the process, make sure issues are analyzed properly and make sure the Forest Service doesn’t do its usual rubber-stamp job.”

Hartmann, president of Save the Scenic Santa Ritas, said Fox had a hard time figuring out what to do after realizing that most people involved opposed the mine.

“She came here with a notion that we would all be engaged in the process . . . what we all were trying to do was to affect the outcome, not just improve the process,” Hartmann said.

Jamie Sturgis, vice president of Augusta Resources Corp., Rosemont’s owner, said in a statement that he is disappointed at the working group’s demise but confident that there will be future opportunities for the public to participate, “to review plans and proposals by Rosemont to provide copper to the nation.”

The company would mine copper, silver and molybdenum on 4,400 acres on the east side of the Santa Ritas and dispose of waste rock and tailings. Company officials say the mine would create 500 jobs. Mining could begin in 2011 and continue for 19 years.

Fox’s decision will not affect the timetable for its environmental analysis, Forest Service officials said. The draft statement is due in November 2009. The final statement is due in July 2010.

“It was an innovative, ambitious idea,” Reta Laford, deputy forest supervisor, said in a statement about the working group. “The U.S. Institute’s professional judgment that the working group is not feasible for this particular project means we’ll continue assessing other opportunities to maintain public involvement.”

Since March, the Forest Service has held nine public meetings on the mine and received more than 11,000 comments on it.

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