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## **San Juan Ridge Mine group says Nevada County's abandoned mines need rethinking**

As the standoff over a proposed reopening of the San Juan Ridge Mine continues, some people are pushing for a Nevada County-wide rethinking of potential alternative uses for abandoned hydraulic mining sites.

“Everybody has an abandoned mine in their backyard and no one wants to look at it,” said Sol Henson, president of the San Juan Ridge Taxpayers Association. “People want to ignore it because of the toxic chemicals, the blight or the illegal activities happening there.”

Meanwhile, however, San Juan Mining Corp. President and CEO Tim Callaway has called for “science, not politics” to be the deciding factor in proceeding with a Draft Environmental Impact Report on reopening the mine, located along Jackass Flats in a remote but populated area of the Ridge.

“We are merely asking Nevada County to make reasonably scientific decisions for completion of a science-based EIR, rather than continuing to make scientific decisions based upon what appears to be politics,” Callaway said in an Oct. 1 letter to Nevada County Planning Director Brian Foss. The four-page letter details a highly technical argument in favor of proceeding with the application without having to collect additional groundwater quality samples or water levels data for the purpose of establishing a baseline.

Henson, whose group does not agree that enough samples have been taken to establish a baseline, said it’s time to look at positive examples of reuse of abandoned mine land, such as Nevada City’s restoration and recreational re-use of a former mine site at Hirschman’s Pond and at the Tribute Trail. Also, Yuba River Charter School is in the process of applying for a permit to build a new school facility at an abandoned mine site at 11157 Rough and Ready Highway.

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And, of course, Empire Mine State Park in Grass Valley is thought of by many locals as the quintessential ideal reuse of abandoned mine lands.

“We support alternative uses that don’t negatively impact water resources or the natural quality of forest land,” Henson said. He said the issue could be up for discussion at the upcoming Wild & Scenic Film Festival, Jan. 15-18, taking place at multiple venues in Nevada City and Grass Valley.

But Callaway is nowhere near ready to concede the fight.

“San Juan Mining Corp. has paid to get an EIR finished for this project and expects one to be completed regardless of the findings,” he said in his letter.

San Juan Ridge residents, business owners and school officials told The Union earlier this year that they oppose the mine reopening because of the fear of drawing down the water table and causing area wells to run dry. That was the outcome in the 1990s when Callaway first tried to mine the area. Residents and the taxpayers association have staged demonstrations and other events to protest the mine’s new reopening application.

Callaway said he suspected the county was bowing to citizen opposition.

“The way the process has gone, we feel that the Planning Department is bending to the pressure from project opponents and crafting non-science-based requirements to try and appease them,” he said in the letter. “At our very first scoping meeting, county counsel and you (Foss) agreed that the politics would come after the science.

“Let’s keep it that way,” Callaway added.

Late last year, about 100 neighboring wells were fitted with groundwater levels monitoring devices and had water quality samples taken regularly for a few months. However, the water quality data collections were halted by Callaway earlier this year. He said in the Oct. 1 letter that Nevada County planners had enough data already to proceed with the EIR.

“We still firmly believe the two years of on-site groundwater elevation and analytical data we have already provided is more than sufficient to support the EIR team’s existing conclusion that groundwater conditions vary too greatly from well to well,” Callaway said. “And that individual

homeowner groundwater baselines need to be established prior to project dewatering in order to evaluate any claims of impacts on a case-by-case basis.”

On Nov. 20, Nevada County Senior Planner Tod Herman said the county has not yet responded to Callaway's letter.

“The county has been working on the response back to Tim, but at this point we have not yet scheduled a meeting with the applicant,” Herman said.

Henson said his group hopes the county will remain firm in demanding sufficient baseline data on both water quality and water elevation.

“It's up to the county at this point,” Henson said. “If it's drawn out much longer, we think the county should consider if this is even a serious application and whether they should be moving on to other things.”

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