

# Cement plant raises issues



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Pueblo citizens are facing a battle. Its a battle between common citizens and those who are in favor of economic development to decide on whether a cement plant will call Pueblo its new home. Its a battle to join together in order to educate those individuals in charge about how building a cement plant would cause more harm than create jobs. Its a battle between the average citizen, concerned about their health and the environment, and the elected official, confident that their influence will bring in a new business for the better of the community.

Rio Grande Portland Cement Corp. is planning to build a \$160 million, highly automated cement plant 8 miles south of town. In September of 1999, the Pueblo County Planning Commission approved a special-use permit allowing the company to build its mining and manufacturing plant on 6, 000 acres southeast of Pueblo. Thereafter, if all the necessary permits are acquired, Rio Grande would be expected to build a cement plant off Lime Road, east of the Stem Beach exit on Interstate 25. (citation here)

The special-use permit, however, carried 21 restrictions. Some restrictions include:

h copies of all license applications and regulatory reports are to be given to the county;

h no blasting in the limestone quarry would be permitted between 6 p. m. and 8 a. m. and none on Sundays;

h no retail sales are permitted without an amendment to the use permit;

h violation of any permit can cause the county to consider revoking the special-use permit;

h Rio Grande could not use more than 70 acres of land at a given time;

h Rio Grande could not burn tires or any hazardous material in its kiln without amending the permit, which would require a new application and public hearing. (citation here)

This permit, however, was only the beginning of the battle that caused citizens to voice their concerns about Pueblos air quality as well as their own health risks.

Resident, Cecil Ross, who owns about 200 acres approximately one mile from the proposed site, believes that the cement plant would be devastating to us and the wildlife that lives there. He voiced his concerns about the vegetation and wildlife at a local press conference held by Neil Carman. A former Texas air quality inspector, Carman was brought to Pueblo by opponents of the plant to help educate citizens about the dangers of having a cement plant close in proximity. (citation here).

Citizens for Clean Air and Water in Pueblo/Southern Colorado have pointed out that the companys own permit states that it will release about 6 million pounds of pollutants into the air each year. In fact, Rio Grandes application draft for a Colorado air quality control permit states that the plant would emit 160 tons per year of particulate pollution (which averages to about 35 pounds escaping into the air each day), 150 tons of very small particulates,

1, 000 tons of oxides of nitrogen, 944 tons of sulfur dioxide and about 1, 000 tons of carbon monoxide. (citation here)

At first, Rio Grande submitted a draft application asking that the plant be allowed to produce 1 million tons of cement a year in order to meet the demand for the product. Now, information taken from an article by The Pueblo Chieftain Online states the company has submitted an amendment to their permit asking that the plant be allowed to manufacture 100 million tons of cement per year, increasing its volume of emissions as well.

Rio Grandes vice president of operations, Ron Hedrick, claims that the only cloud that anyone would see over our operation would be the water vapor on a cold day (citation here). In fact, the many pollutants that would be emitted by the cement plant would be highly invisible, toxins that will eventually end up causing many health related problems for people who already suffer from asthma, emphysema, and bronchitis as well as pneumonia.

Statistics taken from a South Carolina study reported 50 to 100% greater prevalence of coughing phlegm, wheezing, sore throat and eye irritation among the population. Another study found more cases of diagnosed emphysema, sinus trouble, and bronchitis cough in populations that are living downwind of a hazardous waste incinerator. (citation here). In extreme cases, a 1989 British study reported a marked concentration of larynx cancer cases among the population who were within 2 kilometers of a commercial hazardous waste incinerator. (Travis, 1989).

An average citizen with just the slightest bit of common sense would know that with any amount of pollutants in the air, there would be a chance of

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developing mild to severe symptoms not to mention a chronic respiratory disease that may affect them for a lifetime.

Although one would think that the Pueblo Economic Development Corp. had something to do with Rio Grandes interest in building here, they in fact did not. PEDCos President, Jim Spaccamonti, has stated that the only information given to Rio Grande was how to go about applying for permits through the state of Colorado. He clearly wanted all people to know that no incentives were ever offered to the plant to build in the Pueblo County.

In hopes of making the plant more appealing to the citizens, Rio Grande has offered some solutions to keep the peace, which include employing about 80-85 workers at competitive wages plus benefits (citation here). These jobs however would be skilled positions, so no one will know for sure who would fill the positions until its already too late. Also, Rio Grandes cement plant would control dust through the process of either water misting or by dust-collecting systems in the various buildings.

Also, Rio Grande is promising an enclosed, dry process to make cement, however, many people are still not satisfied with the fact that the company still plans to burn coal as its primary source of fuel, with natural gas only listed as an alternative. Some say if the plant were to use natural gas, as suggested by Carman, then it may not lead to the hazardous emissions compared to that of a normal coal burning cement plant. (citation here)

The plant would use a coal-fired kiln to heat material to more than 2, 700 degrees forming it into clinker, the little blackish rocks that are later ground up to make the final product. The ash from the coal would then be used to

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help make the product, that is why Rio Grande plans to use coal instead of natural gas, otherwise it would be more costly to the company to buy more materials to make their product. (citation here). Here we see a prime example of the company looking out for its own interests rather than the city it will affect.

Environmental manager for Rio Grande, Brian McGill, defended the company and claimed that the plant would meet state and federal air quality standards and would be subject to continual monitoring. According to McGill, Rio Grande is not in business to poison people or pollute the environment. Pollutants also listed in the permit include 27, 200 pounds (per year) of hydrogen chloride; 15, 200 pounds of benzene; 13, 300 pounds of sulfur trioxide; 9, 500 pounds of ammonia; and lesser amounts of manganese compounds, methylene chloride, chloromethane, and chromium. (citation here)

Information taken from the Downwinders At Risk web site seems to have a different opinion about cement plants and the incinerators that are located within the plants. A cement plant located in Midlothian, Texas was found to be the states largest source of air pollution in the northern area. The plants emissions were measured to be 24, 096, 200 pounds of five major contaminants in 1995. The plant was also the regions second largest particulate matter polluter with a total of 826. 8 tons. (<http://www.cementkiln.com/downwinders/factsheet.html>).

Many of Pueblos City Council Members are encouraging the company to build its operation in the county against the concerns by the majority of the public.

City Council member John Klomp approves of the new cement plant so long as the state approves the environmental permits. (citation here)

The Colorado Air Quality Control Commission is the only one who has authority to decide which industries are allowed the proper permits to emit hazardous pollutants into the atmosphere. They also have the authority to limit such businesses on days when the air pollution becomes hazardous to the environment. (citation here)

Social networks were formed when word spread of a cement plant proposing to build near Pueblo. Neighbors, family and friends alike all joined together to make their voices heard, resulting in nearly 200 people protesting the cement plant at the July 20 meeting. Back and forth, proponents and opponents of the cement plant argued their opinions at the public meeting, unfortunately it looks as though the business leaders of the Pueblo community will once again win the battle.

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