CSKT MEETING TAKES DEQ TO TASK FOR ARLEE GRAVEL PIT

Louise Lundquist

The state of Montana has refused to hold a public hearing about the proposed gravel pit and asphalt plant north of Arlee, so the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes held their own.

On Thursday, the CSKT Tribal Council held a public meeting with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality at the Pablo Tribal Complex so tribal leaders could get answers about a number of concerns dealing with the proposed gravel pit and asphalt plant northeast of Arlee.

The council had sent a letter to DEQ asking for a full environmental impact statement and other analyses of the proposed pit. The CSKT have never said a public hearing was necessary, but the letter had said it "would be very helpful if DEQ would decide as quickly as possible to hold a public hearing on the proposed gravel pit."

"Our council has the right to decide whether or not a public hearing is necessary," said Tribal Chair Tom McDonald.

"But let's be clear, this is a very significant issue for a very significant reason," Tribal Councilor Kyle Jack said. "This is a gravel pit that's going to be close to the Reservation. And it's going to have a significant impact on the environment." He said the council would do everything it could to make sure the resources aren't impacted. "Our ancestors were here, our grandchildren will be here, this is our last best place."

The council's letter also expressed their concern over Montana's proposed Regulations of Air Pollution. DEQ Mining Bureau Chief Dan Walsh said the recently passed House Bill 599 wouldn't allow that.

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More than a dozen residents raised other issues, including Jim Coefield who said the recently passed HB 362 had clarified who could comment when a review of a project application is still pending before DEQ.

"The most common number of people for a public meeting, or the number of people who were self-certifying," McDonald said. "Because if you're self-certifying, you don't need a public hearing in order to proceed."

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In late May, some Arlee residents were shocked to learn that Rehbein proposed to build a 12-foot-deep, 160-acre gravel pit and asphalt plant near the western edge of the Garden of One Thousand Buddhas.

As they scrambled to organize, they learned that DEQ now requires more than half of the homeowners within a half-mile of the proposed pit to request a public hearing within 30 days, under new rules passed in the 2021 Legislative session. Before 2021, people living within a mile of a project could comment and only 30% of the neighbors needed to request a hearing.

It appears that not all homeowners were contacted, partly because some tribal members live on CSKT property so only the tribal government was notified. Plus, only the primary owner of a property is contacted when there's a project on their property, so if there's multiple owners, DEQ doesn't follow up to confirm everyone was contacted.

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