

To: City of Scandia, City Council Members
From: Don Mitchell, resident at 20233 Quinnell Avenue North
Re: Gravel Mining Proposal

You have before you a serious and difficult issue in the gravel mining proposal, and I do not envy you the choice you will have to make. Strong arguments will be made on both sides. This is a classic case where the rights of an individual family collide head-on with the rights and interests of the larger community. The Zavorals have always been good neighbors, and I bear them no ill will.

We have learned from an early age to respect the rights of an owner to determine the activities that will occur on land that is privately held. It is easy (and often correct) to say “It’s none of anyone else’s business.” On the other hand, every property owner faces limitations on the ways in which land can be used, with the understanding that some individual rights and activities must yield to collective societal priorities. In the case of the gravel mine, if the activity and its consequences had no effect on surrounding properties, on the City of Scandia as a whole, and specifically on the St. Croix River, then the proposed activity would indeed be “nobody’s business” but the Zavorals’. However, the nature and scale of the proposed activity makes it immediately clear that yes, neighboring properties will be affected, and yes, the City of Scandia will be affected, and yes, the river will be affected, too. This means the discussion cannot be limited to the rights of the property owner to do as he likes with his land.

Surely it matters to the Council that noise and dust will envelop not just the mine, but also the surrounding neighborhood, for a period of years while the operation goes forward. Surely it matters that the volume of truck traffic through Scandia will probably increase even beyond the current high levels. (Even the most careful and cautious truck drivers, when appearing on the highway through Scandia in these numbers, represent a hazard to all residents, but especially to the children near the school.) Surely it matters that the aftermath of this project will be a vast hole in the ground, “reclaimed” only in the limited sense that vegetation may be planted around the edges of the void.

All of this, while valid in the discussion, is of local importance and local significance. The mining proposal meets its most serious and fatal objection in the obvious threat to the St. Croix River—a supposedly protected natural resource of national stature. The threat is runoff, whether drastic as occurred in a single incident in the late 1970s, or gradual as will occur through interference with the water table through “internal drainage.”

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement severely understates the first form of this threat when it says:

There is some evidence that a major transportation of soil occurred in the past, primarily based on discussions with area residents and the existence of a delta deposit near the mouth of Zavoral Creek that appears to be the result of a significant erosion event. The cause of this delta deposit is not known. It could be the result of a natural erosion event (major rain event) or the result of human activities.

Excuse me, but the cause is well known and the incident is well documented—a rainstorm in a wet year overwhelmed inadequate protections at the mine site, and a catastrophic flood of sand, gravel, and debris

scoured the creek bed and dumped its unwelcome load directly into the river. The steepness of the terrain gave force and violence to the flood (as it will in any recurrence) and created the delta that is still so painfully obvious to this day. Beyond the sand and gravel, most of which was deposited at the delta, there was a torrent of silt, carrying the influence of the washout far downstream and damaging sensitive organisms well removed from the mining site.

The mining company will insist it can prevent a similar washout by what the DEIS calls a “best management practice.” The same assurance was no doubt offered in the 1970s. This time the risks will be greater, because the basin will be much deeper, the water pressure greater, and the effects of the washout correspondingly more severe. As we have seen, there is no way to mitigate the damage of such a washout after it occurs.

The second form of runoff threat appears in the DEIS’s inadequate discussion of what it calls “internal drainage” at the mine site. Since the plan is to excavate within a few feet of the water table, it seems reasonable to ask what internal drainage actually means. It apparently means that runoff from a substantial area will collect in the immense basin created by the mining activity, and from there it will either pool as a stagnant pond, or enter directly into the ground water system. To call this internal drainage begs the question: Where does the water go after that? The answer is that it goes to the countless springs and seeps that cover the hillsides between the mine site and the river. From there, as anyone might imagine, the runoff will go directly into the river. Runoff that had previously been filtered through thick, packed layers of sand and gravel will now arrive, laden with silt and perhaps other contaminants, immediately at the level of the water table, and will go directly to the river in the outflow from the springs. It is therefore a serious misunderstanding that “internal drainage” will take care of water quality issues, and that no off-site properties or interests will be compromised.

I believe Council members are aware of their stewardship role with respect to the St. Croix River. Each local government on both sides of the riverway has a clear duty toward all other municipalities, toward the federal government, and to all the citizens of Minnesota and Wisconsin, to protect the river through appropriate land use policies. It would be totally contrary to that stewardship to let the proposed mining activity go forward. I trust that the leaders of Scandia will not forget their solemn responsibility.

Sincerely,

Don Mitchell