

# ***Clear Creek Courant Article***

## **Gravel pit in Empire not a good idea**

By Jerry Fabyanic

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The recently proposed Empire gravel pit has understandably raised more than red flags; it has raised alarms, concerns and blood pressure. For good reason.

It would permanently alter a sizable piece of pristine land west of U.S. 40 on the ascent up from Interstate 70, changing it into a stark moonscape denude of life and inhospitable for wildlife over the next quarter century.

Presumably, the “developers” would use large industrial machinery to do the job. A vintage World War II bomb would, one would think, be more efficient, one fell swoop rather than incrementalism. Then, only a matter of hauling out the debris.

To be fair, it's important to weigh the cost-benefits like any other proposed venture to ascertain the tradeoffs in both the short and long term. Then, apply that to specific areas: economic, human health, environmental health, community — local Empire, its immediate neighbors and broader Clear Creek — and more.

Other than potentially economic, one can easily dispense with any side benefits to the environment, wildlife and humans, individually and community. There are none.

Economically, answers need to be provided. How many local jobs will be created? Will local businesses benefit? What will be the toll on local infrastructure such as roads? Tax revenue? We're not talking about an operation on the Henderson Mine scale. In comparison, this seems a mom-and-pop venture.

What if the owners go under, go bankrupt? Who picks up the tab to clean up and restore? If it were an organic grocery store, for example, and went under, the property could easily be re-purposed, and life would go on. But 77.5 acres of ripped-apart delicate mountainous terrain?

That leads into environmental concerns. The area presently is home to and a corridor for bighorn sheep among other wildlife. What would be the impact on them? What about the water table and Clear Creek itself given the runoff and discharges?

Last week the Denver Post featured a story about the latest in the Summitville Mine twist. After a quarter century of EPA funds and work, the site will be turned over in 2020 to us, the Colorado taxpayers, to forever spend \$2 million annually — that's before inflation, of course — to keep the toxins from being unleashed into the streams. Since the original owners were able to weasel out of being liable, we should consider passing a TABOR override to tax mines and fossil-fuel extractors to cover the permanent costs of their never-ending cleanup.

Across Colorado, more than 230 sites still drain toxins into our waterways. Here we have our own saga with the Argo and others, but also recall the year delay with the pilons for the exit 240 bridge in

Idaho Springs when the excavators struck polluted water that needed to be addressed before the project could move forward.

Clear Creek's mining legacy is a mix. Cleanup remains an ongoing effort, but we've been able to leverage that history into nostalgia — historic Clear Creek — a draw business-wise. To that end, Clear Creek's large-scale mining days are behind us. It's not the image we want to project given our eco-tourism gold mine, which, admittedly, has its negative impacts as well. An open-pit eyesore is not the image we should project to guests, visitors and passers-through. Finally, there's the impact on human health and living conditions. The incessant dust created by the excavation would quickly find its way down the hill to the Easter Seals camp and then downwind to Lawson to Idaho Springs. It could be life threatening to those with breathing disabilities. Compounding the dust would be the fumes spewed and road dust stirred up by the hundreds of daily trucks traveling to and fro, which would further add to the joys of navigating the interstate. Libertarians and property-rights fundamentalists might argue, falsely, that owners ought to be able to do with their property as they wish. But property rights are not unrestricted. A couple questions to consider: Does it serve the greater good? Would the product provide a critical resource? It's gravel, for goodness sake.

In the end, the operators would unleash an immeasurable amount of destruction for a bunch of rock so to bring them a pile of cash with no discernible upside for the citizens of Empire or for their neighbors. No, thanks.

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