

Gary council blocks soil recycling facility

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A company's bid to open a soil recycling facility on the corner of Clay Street and 15th Avenue in Gary was blocked after it failed to secure majority support at the Gary Common Council's Tuesday meeting.

Some Gary residents, including members of the grassroots environmental group Gary Advocates for Responsible Development (GARD), objected to the proposed facility's promise of increased truck traffic and raised concerns about its possible environmental impact. Council members were split in their views of the proposal.

Reconstruct Aggregates, Inc. had planned to build a facility that would receive truckloads of soil from construction sites and use water to separate sand and gravel from clay and organic material. Once separated, the sand and gravel would have been sold to local companies for use in concrete making and other construction applications, with the remaining materials proceeding to a local landfill.

The company was founded in 2024 by executives of the Northern Ireland-based CDE Group, a three decadeold multinational firm that specializes in wet processing equipment. Reconstruct Aggregates recently completed construction of a soil recycling facility in the Fort Worth area, which is expected to begin operating soon.

Opening the proposed Gary facility would have required approval of a special exception by the city council. The proposed business does not fall under the list of permitted uses for the land's "limited manufacturing" designation that are enumerated in Gary's municipal code.

The city's board of zoning appeals voted unanimously on Nov. 14 to forward the special exception petition to the city council with a favorable recommendation that was contingent on a number of stipulations, including including a mandate that the new facility confine its operations to the hours between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m.

The council delayed action on the petition in December, and postponed a vote again in January. Councilman Darren Washington, D-at large, who chairs the council's Planning and Development Committee, told The Times on Monday that the council was waiting to hear directly from a member of Reconstruct Aggregates' leadership. The committee heard a presentation from Scott Yahne, a Valparaiso-based attorney who is representing the company, in January.

Under Indiana law, Gary's city council has a maximum of 90 days in which to consider a BZA recommendation. This made Tuesday the final regular council meeting at which the body could consider the special use.

Darren Eastwood, a principal of Reconstruct Aggregates who also serves as CDE's business development director, flew in from Texas to address the council.

He told the body that Gary's proximity to two major highways, as well as to Chicago, makes it an attractive site for a soil recycling business.

"Sand and aggregate tends to come from a long way away from the city. And as we consume those good resources of sand and aggregates, quarries are further and further out," Eastwood said. "And so, these facilities being placed close to the demand center makes good economic sense. You can save some transport on the way there."

Eastwood said that the planned facility would receive "something in the region of 100 trucks every day, maybe more, maybe 125 trucks every day," and would create roughly 15 full-time jobs of varying skill levels.

At past meetings and in correspondence with Reconstruct Aggregates, GARD has raised concerns over the prospect of tainted soil being processed in Gary. Eastwood said at Tuesday's meeting that the proposed site would not handle soil known to be contaminated, the movement of which is tightly regulated by the Indiana Department of Environmental Management.

"At the point it comes to us, if it's declared clean by the transport company, we ultimately have to take them for their word at that," he said. "But if it wasn't clean, if they transport contaminated materials without a waste permit, that is a severe violation that could even finish their business."

Washington was joined by Council Members Dwight Williams, D-6th, Kenneth Whisenton, D-at large, and Linda Barnes-Caldwell, D-5th, in voting in favor of the petition, while Council Members Lori Latham, D-1st, Marian Ivey, D-4th, Myles Tolliver, D-at large, and Dwayne Halliburton, D-2nd voted against it.

Councilwoman Mary Brown, D-3rd, was not present for the vote.

The same four council members opposed to the petition initially voted against rezoning Gary's former Beckman School site to make way for a new light industrial complex last spring. Ivey changed her vote to yes when the council voted to override a mayoral veto of the rezone, securing passage of the item.

Ivey said following Tuesday's vote that Reconstruct Aggregates "didn't seem a good fit" for the city.

"With the 100 to 125 trucks per day, approximate, in those narrow lanes of traffic coming off of our 65th and 15th Avenue, that's a lot," she said. "We already have enough wear and tear on our roads."

Halliburton echoed her argument, saying that "we would never get to the point of getting our roads fixed to a point because every time we fix it, trucks come down and tear them up and they have no responsibility."

Whisenton, for his part, said that Reconstruct Aggregates could have been a boon for the city.

"I worked for many years doing concrete, asphalt. I'm familiar with some of those sites, how dusty they are," he said. "But this process looks different. It looks like an option, a viable option for the future of Gary."

Speaking with The Times following the vote, Eastwood said that it was too soon to say whether Reconstruct Aggregates would be considering other Northwest Indiana sites.

GARD president Dorreen Carey said that she and her colleagues were pleased to see the special exception rejected.

"The number of trucks, I think, was pretty astounding for the area," she said.