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Hamilton wary of nearby mine

By JUDI BLAZE
For the Tribune

HAMILTON — A proposal to reopen a vermiculite mine near Hamilton brings with it the promise of jobs and the fear that the pristine Bitterroot Valley south of Missoula may become a polluted dumping ground for the mine's wastes and the asbestos released from processing the ore.

The Stansbury Mining Company of Alpine, Utah, wants to mine vermiculite ore at the base of Skalkaho Mountain about 15 miles from Hamilton.

The mine, which was closed in 1979 and sold to Stansbury in 1985, covers 1,750 acres.

Lisa Bay, who is doing the socioeconomic study for the company, says total long-term employment from the project will include 50 to 100 new jobs, 95 percent of which will be hired locally.

The payroll, about \$1.4 million a year, would be spent in the area, and "existing employers will get a bit busier," she concluded.

Despite the possibility of jobs for the unemployed in the economically depressed valley, some residents are concerned about the environmental and health impacts of the project. They point to the 45-year-old vermiculite mine in Libby, where polluted air and asbestos have become problems, and say they don't want the same conditions near their homes.

The mine itself worries area residents less than the proposal to house an exfoliation plant in Hamilton.

The company is seeking to have the exfoliation plant built within the city limits of Hamilton, so that it will be eligible for \$6.8 million in industrial revenue bonds to finance the construction.

According to company plans, after the rock is bulldozed out of the mine, it will go through a separation process to extract the vermiculite. The graded ore will then be transported by truck to the exfoliation plant, where it will be processed and made into potting soil, insulation and fire retardant materials.

Mark Welch of Western Resources, the company that will direct

the mining project, says the process is much like a "hot air popcorn popper."

He said the vermiculite, when heated, expands to 15 times its size. It is also absorbent and, when it isn't full of water, it's full of air, which makes it valuable in potting soil, insulation and other products.

One of the byproducts of processing vermiculite, however, is the release of asbestos, a substance that is said to pose health risks. Victor Borchers, chief executive officer of Stansbury, said traces of asbestos have been found in the Hamilton vermiculite, but he said the levels are below those determined to be dangerous.

"We don't believe it's going to be a problem," Borchers said. He said the company will be using only "state-of-the-art equipment" and the latest air quality technology.

Borchers, a citizen of South Africa whose specialty is to help reorganize companies that go bankrupt, said other mines, such as the one in Libby, have produced some health hazards, but he said they were operating under old laws and that current standards are stricter.

"In my view, this facility will meet all the requirements," he said.

But some residents, including Marjory Bergh, a retired school teacher from Hamilton, don't agree.

"I don't think it's fair that they don't have any consideration for the retired people," Bergh says. She also expressed concern for the children of the valley.

Over half the residents of Hamilton, a community of 3,000, with another 5,000 to 6,000 living in the outlying area, are retired.

Doris Milner, another local resident, said she is opposed to the operation because it not only threatens the health of residents, but also the area's wildlife. She said she would rather see the valley preserved as a clean, healthy area.

Similar concerns were expressed by other residents at a recent public hearing. But Hamilton Mayor Jim

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Witlock said the project would be a boon to the town's tax base. "If you bring something in for employment, there is some price you have to pay for that," he said, adding that he thought the plant would not cause any major problems.

Stansbury has made a commitment to buy 11.2 acres of land just outside Hamilton, on the condition it be annexed into the city limits and expected that industrial development revenue bonds be approved. The town council meets tonight to determine whether it will approve such an arrangement. Council member Allen Belcher said he is confident the proposal will be approved. Belcher said the company has indicated it will begin mining by the end of summer if all the permits and bonding go through as expected.

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