

Irish Hills residents organize to oppose a proposed gravel mine in Cambridge Township in Lenawee County

Michigan Radio | By Lester Graham

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Residents had a lot of questions and well-meaning suggestions, but they learned from Pangea Environmental geologist Mike Wilczynski their options to persuade the township planning board were limited.

A company wants to start gravel mining on land in Michigan that is surrounded by eight lakes in Lenawee County.

Cambridge Township in the Irish Hills area is being asked to approve a gravel mining operation near several lake communities. The company, SSP Leasing LLC, is operated by John Warvel, who's also with Sunrise Aggregates in Dansville, Mich. The industry term for mining gravel, stone, and sand is "aggregate mining."

Aggregate is in demand in Michigan for road construction, among other uses.



Mike Wilczynski. Pangea Environmental. LLC

About 60 residents gathered at The Winery North of 12 near the proposed mining site to map out a strategy to get the township to deny the request. Most were uncertain about their options in efforts to stop the quarry.

They said they didn't have enough information to know what avenues were open to them, and they didn't think township officials had enough information to make a good decision.

Wendy Holmes is with the group Protect the Irish Hills.

We're all new to this and we're just kind of scrambling. When the developer presented the information, there was very minimal information given at that meeting. So we really don't know what questions to ask," said Wendy Holmes, who is with the group Protect the Irish Hills.

The group has been contacting other similar organizations that have been opposed to gravel mining sites, including in nearby [Grass Lake Township in Jackson County](#) and [Sharon Township in Washtenaw County](#).



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Mike Wilczynski is a geologist who's helped several townships understand the community costs and consequences of putting a gravel mine in the wrong place.

Mike Wilczynski is a geologist with Pangea Environmental. He's advised many townships and citizens groups on the potential consequences and community costs of

“It’s a lot of unknowns, you know, and people are afraid of unknowns. People have never been through this before. Planning commissioners have not been through this before for the most part. So it’s a learning process for everyone,” Wilczynski said.

Local government cannot deny a permit for a gravel mining site just because the neighbors don’t want it. They have to determine if approving the mine would cause “very serious consequences.”

Wendy Holmes said she has concerns about some of the potential consequences.

“Silica dust, noise, destruction of wetlands, potential for water contamination. There’s just so many things and they’re all questions we’re learning about because we’re all new to this whole idea.”

Many people were worried about the truck traffic – so-called "gravel trains" with dual trailers. The area is working to restore some of the Irish Hills’ historic tourist attractions. Some of the residents and businesspeople are afraid dozens of gravel trains each day on the twisty curves of U.S. 12 would not just be a nuisance, but a hazard.

The Cambridge Township Planning Commission will be meeting on November 30. The opponents are talking to the lawyer who helped Grass Lake residents stop a gravel mine to determine the best way to make their arguments to the commissioners.

Calls to both the mining company and Cambridge Township have not been returned.

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Lester Graham reports for The Environment Report. He has reported on public policy, politics, and issues regarding race and gender inequity. He was previously with The Environment Report at Michigan Radio from 1998-2010.

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