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Mining clashes roil Michigan communities as demand for gravel rises



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The Detroit News

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Mike Trudeau was getting ready to move into a new house overlooking a spring-fed lake in Lenawee County last fall when he received a public notice about plans to turn the farm next door into a gravel mine.

Trudeau learned that a company had bought the farm property and applied for a permit to mine sand and gravel. Concerned about potential dust from the mining activity and heavy truck traffic that would need to come in and out of the site, Trudeau feared the project might affect his family's health.

"It was very devastating," he recalled, explaining that he and members of his family have asthma and other health issues. "We were concerned about our own health issues initially."

A few weeks later, the Cambridge Township board hosted its first public meeting about the proposed mine. At the meeting, Tim Warvel, the gravel mine applicant and the owner of the company Sunrise Aggregates, gave a presentation about the proposal.

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"We want to ease people's minds," he told the audience, expressing a desire to contribute to the community. Warvel assured residents that after materials were extracted from the property, the company would build houses along a portion of the land, around the quarry lake, that would be created for the mining operation.

Trudeau showed up to listen, but said he left disappointed. He felt like the company had provided little information or data to show that the mine would not have negative impacts, particularly with nearly two dozen interconnected lakes at varying elevations in the area and the private wells residents rely on for their drinking water. That concern pushed Trudeau and his neighbors into action.

“I’d never been to a township meeting in my life. But I’ve been to every one since,” he said.



Mike Trudeau stands on his property, which ends at the tree line behind him, in Cambridge Township on July 6, 2023. A gravel mining company has applied for a special permit to operate a sand and gravel mine on the neighboring property near Trudeau’s home and surrounded by several lakes in the Irish Hills area. *David Guralnick, The Detroit News*

Over the last decade, similar community debates have unfolded in townships across the state, pitting the aggregate industry’s efforts to expand sand and gravel mining sites against growing public pushback. The issue has become particularly heated in south-central Michigan where at least two dozen gravel mines dot the area’s resource-rich farmland and rolling hills.



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Within a 15-mile radius, from the western stretches of Washtenaw County and the northern edges of Lenawee County through the heart of Jackson County, about a half dozen rural townships have found themselves at the center of a land rush sparked by the aggregate industry’s efforts to set up new gravel mining operations amid a nationwide boom in infrastructure spending and high demand for the materials they sell.

As companies seek permits to dig for gravel across hundreds of acres of farmland in the resource-rich area, however, residents who have lived alongside sand and gravel pits for decades are now seeking to block new mining activity. After years of health complaints, environmental concerns and what they say are broken promises, the communities who have long coexisted with sand and gravel mines are putting up an unexpected fight and seeking more scrutiny over an industry that they say has not been a good neighbor.

Armed with social media as a tool to organize and aided by a small cadre of scientists and lawyers, residents in the area have managed to pump the brakes on the gravel industry’s expansion efforts, while asking local officials to reevaluate local zoning ordinances and permit approval criteria.

The public opposition against gravel mines has coincided with a boom in spending on infrastructure projects and an edict from Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer to “fix the damn roads,” but opposition to sand and gravel extraction has been building for years, as has the frustration from the aggregate industry.

“We've been spending a record amount of money on increasing our infrastructure,” said Doug Needham, the executive director of the Michigan Aggregates Association, explaining that those projects require “a tremendous amount” of natural materials.

“So that high demand for our infrastructure has placed a large demand on the need to get sand and gravel.”

Industry: Local leaders are caving

The community opposition has also triggered criticism from the industry that township governments are caving to wealthy residents and letting aesthetic preferences get in the way of new gravel mines at a time when the materials they produce and distribute are in high demand for critical public infrastructure projects and housing.

According to Needham, as companies seek to open new mines to meet the demand for materials, local communities are getting in the way.

“As we go to try to open up new locations, we have communities that are denying us the ability to mine the material on our property,” he said.

Needham said it's become routine for companies to submit mining permits, only to be told that a township is placing a moratorium on mining permits and rewriting its zoning ordinance. Those updated zoning ordinances, he explained, make it more challenging for mine applicants to meet the requirements needed for approval and are blocking companies' efforts to produce more material.

“Sand and gravel are the fundamental building blocks of our economy because we build the foundations on top,” Needham said. “And unfortunately, we have to get it where Mother Nature places the sand and gravel.”

As communities have gotten more organized, aggregate companies have sought ways to make it easier for them to navigate the permitting process. They lobbied for a series of bills in the state Legislature, first introduced in 2018, that aim to curb local say in the approval process by putting the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy in charge of approvals. The most recent effort to limit local controls over gravel mines got underway this spring. But amid public pushback and concerns raised about language in the bills, the package failed to make it out of committee.

In some Michigan communities where residents have clashed with mining companies, trust is hard to come by as the aggregate industry seeks to streamline the permit process.

In Jackson County's Grass Lake Charter Township, about 15 miles north of Cambridge Township, residents have spent years grappling with a sand and gravel mine that critics said has overstayed its welcome. The township initially issued a five-year special use permit for a piece of farmland on Bohne Road just off Interstate-94, but when the permit expired in 2008, the mining continued. Community members have since sought to shut down the mine, but local officials have re-approved the permit multiple times.



Aggregate Industries Sand and Gravel Supplier operated a mining operation in Grass Lake. Critics argue that what was supposed to be a five-year operation has continued for nearly two decades. *Lon Horwedel, Special To The Detroit News*

“What started out as this supposedly small project that was only going to last for five years has been going on for nearly 20 years now,” said Bobbi Harper, a Grass Lake resident who has been vocal against the mine.

The Bohne Road mine controversy had a ripple effect in the community. In 2017, when another company submitted a permit for a new mine in Grass Lake in a more residential area, Harper and other community members organized to stop it.

“They want these pits that are very close to infrastructure and highways, and unfortunately when you have that infrastructure in place, you have people that have their homes,” she said.

After the permit was approved by the township, residents appealed the decision in local court. A judge ultimately sided with residents, citing concerns about the project’s location. Eventually residents reached a settlement agreement with the township and the mine operator to turn the property into a residential development instead.

“We were just all trying to help one another,” Harper said. “It hasn't been easy.”

Seeking more vetting

At the Cambridge Township site last month, hydrogeologist Mike Wilczynski stood off to the side of a dirt road looking out at Kelly Lake, which sits roughly 900 feet above sea level directly east of the property where the proposed gravel mine operation would be located.

Wilczynski has spent his career working on mining and water issues, first for private companies like Chevron and later for the state of Michigan. Since retiring from the Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy, the Brighton resident has worked with concerned residents in communities across the state like Cambridge Township as they grapple with a gravel mine proposal.

From Wilczynski’s perspective, outdated zoning ordinances have allowed companies to open new gravel mines without proper vetting.

The proposed gravel mining operation in Cambridge Township would span a 300-acre piece of property surrounded by a chain of interconnected lakes positioned at various elevation levels along the hilly terrain. Several lakes directly west and north of the property have significantly lower elevation than the mining property itself. Wilczynski says a study is needed to understand the impact mining activity could have on Cambridge Township’s lakes and aquifers.



Dave McCaig, left, fishes with his grandsons Ian McCaig, 6; Kyle McCaig, 4; and Colton Moran, 7, on Kelly Lake in Cambridge Township on July 6, 2023. A gravel mining company has applied for a special permit to operate a sand and gravel mine on property surrounded by several lakes, including Kelly Lake, in the Irish Hills area. *David Guralnick, The Detroit News*

"You should not start digging beneath the ground unless you know what's there. You wouldn't drive through a fog really fast, would you? It's the same thing," said

Wilczynski, who works as a consulting engineer under his own company, Pangea Environmental.

Wilczynski said there are ways to operate gravel mines in a way that limit the impact on surrounding communities. In addition to performing more rigorous environmental and hydrogeological studies, he said the state of Michigan should create an inventory of the state's aggregate resources and map out a plan for where and how to move forward with developing them.

"If you do it right, you select your location," Wilczynski said, "you keep it away from a population center and you can make them develop it into a recreation area when they're done."

The Aggregates Association's Needham said fears around gravel mining are misguided. He said the aggregate association fully supports "a centralized plan" that allows companies to go through the state of Michigan for all gravel permits, which he said would help the state get a handle on the number of active permits and better understand where mining is taking place.

The industry group also supports mapping efforts to better understand where material is located and ensure that local communities protect the resource.

"It'll help get a number on how many active permits we have and where all of the locations are being mined ... (and) create consistency across the state," Needham said.

In Cambridge Township, it wasn't long after the first township board meeting that Trudeau and dozens of neighbors and other community members organized to fight the mine. They started a nonprofit and created a website with resources about the permitting process. They did research, contacted experts like Wilczynski, organized their own town hall-style meetings and packed township meetings.

"It's not about how long you've been coming to Irish Hills. It's not about 'Oh, their grandparents had the property and their grandparents had the property.' It's not about that," said Trudeau. "It's about: How do you guarantee our health and our safety? ... And if they can, great, then you deserve to have a mine."

Warvel and his team at Sunrise Aggregates continued to try to reassure the community that the company would be a good neighbor.

"I know I'm not going to be welcomed with open arms, but I ask for the opportunity to prove that I am not the monster that is being painted in so many social media aspects," Warvel said during a township meeting in November.

Despite Warvel's efforts, at the end of December, the Cambridge Township board passed a resolution imposing a moratorium on new mining activity while it embarked on an effort to update its zoning ordinance. The gravel company responded by filing a lawsuit against the township over the permit moratorium.

Forming a gravel ordinance

Meanwhile, on a recent Wednesday inside the Cambridge Township hall, residents had plenty of opinions on what the new ordinance should include.

"This (gravel mine) has the potential to impact several lakes, watersheds and plants as well as homes, businesses and recreational areas," said Cathy Nearhood. "We are a unique area. We have 23 lakes within a three mile area, so this ordinance is of importance. We have to make it right."

Another resident, Diane Higgins, who lives across the street from where the mine would go, voiced concerns that the ordinance would only require a 4-foot high fence.



Cambridge Township resident Diane Higgins, left, and retired state environmental department employee Mike Wilczynski, right, chat with others about their concerns about gravel mining operations in the region. *Kayla Ruble, The Detroit News*

Higgins grew up spending summers at her family's cottage in Cambridge Township. Eventually she and her husband decided to move there full time. When she walks down to the mailbox at the end of her property, she has a view of the area's rolling hills. But if the mining permit is approved, that view will be replaced with gravel pits and dozens of trucks coming in and out each day to pick up loads of the material.

In between back-to-back township meetings last week, Higgins caught up with some of the other meeting regulars, none of whom could recall anything that had rallied the residents of Cambridge Township and the other nearby Irish Hills communities quite like the gravel mine debate.

As the township board continues to mull the new zoning ordinance with the moratorium on mining permits in place, Higgins is hopeful that residents' efforts will succeed.

"We're fighting back," Higgins said. "And I think we're giving them a harder run for their money than they ever thought would happen."

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