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How 'stop the quarry' group beat big business

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They did stop the quarry.

The neighbours who opposed a massive gravel operation in Flamborough, the civic officials who supported them and the politicians who took the case forward have shut down a corporation's bid to start a major new quarry on sensitive land.

The local opponents coalesced around a simple slogan, "stop the quarry," but reaching their goal was far from simple and, until this week, still far from certain.

A citizens group called Friends of Rural Communities and the Environment, or FORCE, grew out of the proposal by St. Marys Cement to open a new quarry on 158 hectares in Carlisle, where the company was planning to extract stone for the next 25 years or longer.

The province announced Tuesday that it had issued a zoning order that permanently protects the land. Barring a successful appeal, the move kills the quarry plan.

So far, the company has said it considers the decision a "grave error" and is examining its legal options after spending six years and \$20 million seeking approvals for its proposal.

St. Marys had nothing to add yesterday, but the Ontario Stone, Sand and Gravel Association said the decision undermines the approvals process and threatens to weaken investment in Ontario.

The powerful aggregate business rarely loses an application, and this is the first time the province has used a zoning order to stop a quarry.

For FORCE's Graham Flint, Tuesday's announcement was like "Christmas in April," with Liberal MPP Ted McMeekin playing Santa Claus by delivering the news.

Flint said his group had to learn and act quickly and effectively to protect its community from environmental, traffic, water and other hazards they feared a quarry would bring. "When you threaten our homes, when you affront us with something we fundamentally feel is unreasonable, we're not going to back down," he said.

The way the citizens and government succeeded is inspiring and instructive to others fighting their own local battles, he added.

"We're happy the precedent is introduced and we are feeling good about it and hoping it will happen for Mt. Nemo as well, because the case is equally deserving if not more so," said musician and activist Sarah Harmer. Her group, Protecting Escarpment Rural Land, is working to prevent the licensing of a new quarry on Mount Nemo in rural Burlington.

In West Montrose, a small community west of Guelph, the Bridgekeepers group is fighting a proposed gravel pit near a covered bridge.

Co-chairperson Tony Dowling said citizens groups are getting better at learning the rules, raising money and marshalling support, helping to level what had been a lopsided playing field. "We're seeing a trend here where in the past aggregate applications were almost rubber-stamped," he said. "Now, there is an acknowledgement that aggregate (operations) -- be it quarries or pits -- don't belong everywhere."

Environment Hamilton executive director Lynda Lukasik, a veteran of many community campaigns, said the Flamborough decision is refreshing and proves that organized, informed opposition can be very effective.

FORCE evened up the fight against a powerful company with a leadership group that includes financial and environmental experts, a former politician, a web designer and others, and by raising more than half a million dollars.

"What I would give for a war chest like that," Lukasik joked. "I'm a strong advocate of community empowerment and facilitating community empowerment, so I certainly wouldn't want to say that's what you need to make the change."

FORCE's Flint, who quit his job as a Microsoft executive to devote himself to the fight, said his group tapped the skills and resources of neighbours to research issues, plan and pool their finances as they girded for the possibility of long and expensive hearings.

He said FORCE has stressed reason over emotion, gathering credible information to counter the proponent's case for the quarry.

A core group of 18 members meets every two weeks, filtering through complex rules and processes, setting strategy and bringing in hundreds of members of the broader community at strategic points. "We acted like a nucleus. We figured out what was important and what wasn't," Flint said. "We found the road map through. We said, 'This is how we're going to win.'"

McMeekin said it was easier to work with the residents group because it was informed and civil.

"This FORCE group is about as professional a community advocacy group as I've seen in my 30 years in politics and related community development work," he said. "I listened and I was completely sold on the inappropriateness of this site."

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