

Carlton: Community needs larger role in gold mining discussion

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There are seven Buckingham County residents serving on the county's litter committee. That number will come up later, so just hang on to it for now. And this is not a column criticizing the number of people making those decisions. If I was a county resident, I would want to know that a number of my neighbors, people who dealt with the same situation I did on a daily basis, were making sure the area stayed clean.

But the same can be said for other issues. That's why, after all, the county welcomes volunteers on a number of committees, including the latest, focused on gold mining. Here, however, is my question. If litter is important enough for the county to assign seven seats on its committee, then what does it say when the county's gold mining committee only has three, with just one spot set aside for a non-politician?

Now before I get into that, let's give some background for those just joining us. There is a Canadian prospecting company, Aston Bay Holdings, looking for gold in Buckingham, as a confirmed gold vein runs through the area. Over the span of the next 5 to 10 years, Aston Bay would prefer to identify the best area for a mine, buy the mineral rights if not straightout buy property, and then sell to the highest bidder, who would then in theory come set up a gold mine in Buckingham.

The problem

The problem is that Virginia doesn't really have rules and regulations in place to deal with the practice of gold mining. We learned that late last year, as a workgroup put together by the General Assembly finished its report. They detailed multiple environmental, regulatory and economic concerns, pointing out that regulations haven't been updated in at least 40 years. Now the Assembly convenes for its latest session this week, but there's been zero discussion about doing anything with the study. As a result, the issue has been kicked back to the Buckingham County Board of Supervisors to deal with.

I don't envy their job. The state once again shrugs and walks away, so it's up to local government to tackle the hard work and deal with the consequences. They can do nothing and hope the state eventually makes a decision. They can put in place policies effectively banning gold mining and then deal with the almost guaranteed legal challenges. They can allow

gold mining but put strict regulations in place, to try and mitigate. Or maybe there's a fourth option nobody's thought of yet. And so, Buckingham supervisors set up a three-person committee to weigh options and come back with a recommendation, a group consisting of two supervisors and one member of the public.

This is where residents got upset. Whatever choice the county makes will hit them, one way or another. The history of gold mining isn't exactly one filled with benefits for the cities, towns and counties where it takes place. Instead, residents are often stuck with the cleanup bills, the road repairs due to trucks hauling ore and the affect on farms, where rock dust, silt deposits and sludge damage crops and livestock feed. And yes, it's possible none of that will happen, despite what the state report said. But if your home, if your farm and therefore your livelihood was riding on the result, would you be willing to just roll the dice?

I would want representation

I grew up on a 315-acre farm in western North Carolina, where we raised crops, Hereford cattle and didn't do a bad job with horses either. If my farm was at risk due to a situation like this, I would want representation on the committee making the recommendation. And yes, politicians are elected to do just that, but in a case like this, people want to see other ordinary folks in the discussion. And I'm not talking about just one person. I mean at least five or six, pulled from a wide variety of backgrounds, to truly represent county residents.

But then it all depends on what you're looking for. If you already know what decision will come out of this, then let's just move on. Just hold a work session as a board, take a vote and be done with it. By including two supervisors on this three-person committee, one of which is Jordan Miles, who served on the state gold mining workgroup, it seems pointless.

What will this committee review that the workgroup didn't over the last six months? Why rehash the same thing over and over?

But if the goal is to truly get an independent recommendation, I'd argue you need to stop and add more people.

Buckingham County is not on the clock here. Yes, everyone wants a decision immediately, but we have time to be thoughtful here. Aston Bay estimates it'll take 10 years before they're finished prospecting and that keeps getting pushed back, as they haven't restarted work in Buckingham since 2020. That's based on information from the sites and according to what their CEO, Thomas Ullrich, told me in November.

Such a small committee, with less chance for public involvement than your litter operation, doesn't make people feel like they're being represented. It makes them feel like this is just going through the motions. And that doesn't help anyone.