

Revised Pike plan has few fans

By Leslie Bridgers

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WESTBROOK (July 24): The group of businesses and residents that organized to oppose Pike Industries' expansion on Spring Street is meeting Thursday to determine whether Pike's latest changes to its plan would be a better fit for the area.

According to one neighbor, they won't.

Since meeting with city staff last week, Pike has decided to remove a second quarry and a permanent rock crusher from its site plan.

Pike's plans to expand have pit the construction company against another one of the city's largest taxpayers, Idexx Laboratories, which is in the middle of a \$165 million expansion in Westbrook, including a new corporate headquarters adjacent to the site where Pike wants to put an asphalt plant. The company has argued that the Pike expansion doesn't fit the city's vision for the area as a home for light industry.

In recent months, the debate has sparked the interest of other local businesses, which came together to form Westbrook Works, a group opposed to Pike's expansion.

Members of Westbrook Works came out in droves to a Planning Board meeting July 1 to express their concerns about the increase in blasting proposed by Pike and the effect it would have on neighboring businesses. Representatives from Pike say they have taken those concerns into consideration in formulating their new plan. However, Pike still plans to increase the frequency of blasting at the existing quarry on Spring Street and add an asphalt plant to the site – two of the opposition's main concerns.

“They put some lipstick on it, and they're trying to sell it to the public,” said Warren Knight, owner of Smiling Hill Farm, about Pike's latest plan. “Basically, it's no change.”

Dick Daigle, facilities manager for Idexx, and City Planner Molly Just both said his week that they had not yet looked at the plan.

According to Jonathon Olson, regional manager for Pike, the company's quarry on Main Street has not been in use this year because it is no longer financially viable to extract rock from the quarry and transport it more than 300 feet to the surface. That has increased the amount of blasting taking place at the company's quarry on Spring Street.

The asphalt plant on Main Street is still in operation, but if the company is able to put a new asphalt plant on the Spring Street site, it will be able to close both the one on Main Street and another on Bishop Street in Portland. Neighbors have also expressed concern about an increase in traffic in the Spring Street and County Road area, but Olson said by having the quarry and the plant at the same location, there will be less truck traffic in the city.

Normally, the city would encourage the expansion of a long-standing local business. But staff and elected officials have been caught in a bind since Idexx, which develops, manufactures and distributes veterinary tests and equipment, told the city in March that, if Pike's plans were approved, it would likely not move forward with building its corporate headquarters, which was discussed when Idexx was negotiating for a tax increment financing agreement with the city.

In an effort to stop Pike's expansion and ensure that Idexx would stay, Mayor Bruce Chuluda proposed rezoning the land between Spring and Saco streets – including Five Star Industrial Park and Pike's property – from industrial to light manufacturing. The Committee of the Whole tabled the issue in hopes that the two companies could reach a compromise, and the city wouldn't have to chose sides between two of its biggest taxpayers.

Negotiations between the companies broke down last month, and though Pike said it was willing to adjust its site plan to appease its neighbors, the alternative plan that was presented still didn't satisfy Idexx. When Pike returned to the Planning Board earlier this month, it presented its original plan, again putting the city in a position where it would have to chose between the companies.

Though Pike says the latest plan is another attempt to compromise, those opposed to the project say it's no better than the first plan.

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George Rodrigues, senior scientific manager at Artel, a company specializing in analytical instruments located near Pike, said he wonders if the new plan is simply a strategy for Pike to avoid having to get a special exception for the second quarry. Pike would need a special exception because having a quarry is no longer a permitted use in the zone.

“It didn't seem to me very much had changed,” he said.

John Koris, environmental manager for Pike, said both eliminating the need to get a special exception and addressing the concerns of the neighbors are being taken into account as the company redesigns its site plan. He said adding the second quarry now was just an effort to avoid having to do it 80 years from now, when the resources at the existing Spring Street quarry run out.

Koris said neighbors expressed concern over the permanent rock crusher, which would have operated on the surface of the property. The portable crusher the company would use will be inside the quarry, which will attenuate the noise and dust emitted from the equipment.

Though Koris said the schedule of blasting at the quarry will change, the intensity of the blasts will remain the same. He said that, for the past couple of years, Pike has been blasting in the quarry twice a week for two weeks and then taking a break for a month or so. Now, he said, the blasting will happen once a week, every week.

Taking into consideration the fact that the quarry was inactive for decades before Pike acquired it from Blue Rock, Knight thinks the company should have been re-evaluated by the city before any blasting was allowed.

“They shouldn't be operating out there period,” Knight said.

According to Olson, the blasting has been going on for years and the company hasn't received any complaints, he said, "until Idexx decided they didn't want to be the neighbor of a quarry."

According to Code Enforcement Officer Rick Gouzie, Pike currently has a permit to blast and will have to apply for a new one if it increases the amount of blasting in the quarry. Between April and December 2008, Pike is permitted to blast 15 times. According to Koris, there have been six blasts so far this year, all of which occurred in April.

Koris said Pike is still working on the plan and has more studies to conduct and work to do before it's ready for the Planning Board. He said he hopes it will be on the board's agenda in September.

According to the Westbrook Works Web site, www.westbrookworks.org, supporters include Knight, Rodrigues, Lisa Estey, Cathy Costa, Paul Levesque, Ruth and Kirk Noble, as well as Creative Office Pavilion, WPME and WPXT-TV and New Age Media. The group meets regularly to plan strategy to halt Pike's expansion.

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