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Urgency Slows for U.P. Mining Project

As World Limestone Market Weakens, Graymont Is Taking Its Time at Rexton

By Stephen King

With the world market for limestone softening in the past year, the Rexton Project of Graymont mining company is moving ahead at a slower pace than expected.

“We have lost the urgency we had a few months ago,” said P.J. Stoll, project manager.

Drilling and taking core samples are activities underway at the site, where a new quarry is planned in the area around Rexton, in west central Mackinac County. Although the project involved land in Garfield, Hendricks, and surrounding area in Luce and Chippewa counties, the major portion of the Rexton Project is in Hudson Township, literally surrounding the town of Rexton.

“We are still drilling. That is what is perhaps most noticeable by the public at this time,” said Rexton Project spokesperson Daryl Browning. “We are taking core samples from around the project area and testing for consistency in the stone. With what we have seen so far, we are pretty happy.”

One of the biggest and most divisive issues in Mackinac County in recent years was the request by the Graymont Company to open a new quarry. During the course of many months, there was a heated debate over whether the state, and its Department of Natural Resources, should allow this project to go ahead. Some saw the exchange or sale of land and or mineral rights as a waste of state land, while others were looking at the economic benefit for the entire area. The two sides on this issue soon moved very far apart. Those against cited many issues, such as environmental damage, road

deterioration, noise, and a loss in property values. Those in favor said these issues were not as serious as claimed and they looked for many economic benefits.

As the dust settled over the deal, all were then waiting for the quarry to begin operation. Those in favor were looking forward to the jobs promised and economic benefits. Those opposed were still looking for their prophecies of noise, environmental disaster, and other bad effects to come true.

Graymont was predicting that they would have the mine up and running as soon as this past spring. They worked on construction on the Sand Products dock in Epoufette and were starting to get things into place to begin fullfledged mining at what was the old Hendricks Quarry, on Borgstrom Road, just south of the Luce/Mackinac County line.

About a year ago, global economic issues lowered the price of limestone.

Over the past few months, Graymont had started limited mining at the former Hendricks Quarry. The company actually blasted and got a small amount of rock ready to transport. This was intended to be sent to a processor for further evaluation. Then, that process also slowed and that rock remains where it is.

The company is still working with the state, Mr. Browning said, on the transfer of the Wilwin property. This is a former veterans rehabilitation facility just west of Trout Lake. Graymont is in the process of winterizing the lodge, which is more than 100 years old, and Mr. Browning said that the company has no firm plans on what the future of the old building will be.

With the company purchasing property in the area, property values in Hudson Township have risen slightly, said Township Supervisor Al Garavaglia.

“As of now, I have seen little change in property values in this township, and if anything, they seem to have risen slightly,” he said. “That’s because Graymont has been purchasing property, and some of the caps have come of some of that property and actually raised the taxable value. Before Graymont came along, there was quite a bit of property for sale in this township. And now that Graymont is here, there is still quite a bit of property for sale in this township.”

He pointed out that the company has contributed money in the area: “The biggest thing that I have seen economically in this area has been the grants. They have put almost \$100,000 into the local economy. We got a grant for \$20,000 which we put into a remodeling project for our town hall.”

The grants are part of the deal reached between Graymont and the state, in which Graymont agreed to give \$100,000 per year to assist the local economy. This past year, the Mackinac Economic Alliance oversaw the distribution of those grants. Garfield, Hudson, Hendricks, Engadine school district, and the Top of The Lake Snowmobile Museum all received grants. Also, the MEA kept \$5,000 for themselves for administrative costs. They did not disclose those parties that submitted applications but did not receive grants.

Said Mr. Stoll of the company: "This is a 100-year project. Slowing our progress is not a bad thing. It will give us more time to use more technology and to make this a better operation for all of those involved."

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