

Editorial: EP project addresses a concrete issue

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There is a cautionary tale in all of the road construction that is under way and pending in the Eden Prairie area, something along the lines of: Be careful what you ask for.

You see, the rapid growth of the Twin Cities area has dried up some of the traditional sources of aggregates such as sand, gravel and crushed rocks. Where mining once took place, suburban housing and office complexes now rise. Establishment of new aggregate mining operations in the Twin Cities is, understandably, wholly unpopular with nearby homeowners.

All of which seems rather innocuous until one realizes that aggregates are a key ingredient of concrete and asphalt, which in turn are necessary to build not only roads, bridges, sidewalks and parking lots, but also houses, schools, offices and shopping centers.

Why, the amount of local road construction alone is staggering: widening of I-494, new bridges on Highway 169, the soon-to-be-extended new Highway 212 ... not to mention badly needed city projects like the Highway 212-Prairie Center Drive intersection improvements. According to the concrete industry, it takes 20,000 tons of aggregate to build a single mile of four-lane highway. Minnesota goes through about 51.2 million tons of aggregate a year, about 58 pounds per person, per day.

In other words, we need that sand and gravel and crushed rock -- lots of it -- and it's becoming harder and harder to get in the metropolitan area. Greater Minnesota has plenty of it, and it's cheap to mine. It's the transportation that's expensive, boosting the price of all that building and infrastructure that's going up around us.

The cautionary "be careful what you ask for" is this: Eden Prairie has begged for new roads for years. Now that many major local projects have begun, aggregate is badly needed. A part of the solution hits close to home; it comes in the form of a new enterprise approved Tuesday by Eden Prairie city officials: an aggregate transfer facility in the railroad-oriented industrial park located along County Road 62 between Baker Road and County Road 4.

It won't be pretty. With proper regulation by the city and administration by the owner, however, it just might avoid becoming a nuisance. Instead, it might provide a benefit to the local construction industry and perhaps indirectly to each of us in the form of controlled building costs, as well as less congestion and pollution by using rail cars as opposed to relying on heavy-truck transport to the Twin Cities.

The proposal by L.G. Everest, Inc., of Sioux Falls, S.D. calls for use of the existing Twin Cities & Western Railroad line to transport coarse granite stone from western Minnesota to a 2.74-acre site on Industrial Drive in Eden Prairie. There, the rail cars -- about one 40-car train per day -- would be emptied, with about half of the tonnage going to nearby Midwest Asphalt and the other half being trucked away by other contractors. First-year sales are expected to be 30,000-50,000 tons, although forecasts indicate sales could reach as high as 300,000 tons per year by 2015.

A company spokesman pledged Tuesday to match the operating hours of Midwest Asphalt -- generally a 7 a.m.-to-7 p.m. schedule of operations, with some exceptions -- and also closely maintain the site to keep Industrial Drive free of aggregate. Noise, dust, traffic and water-quality impacts have already been assessed, to the city's satisfaction.

It's another example of Eden Prairie helping with regional needs and economically doing its part to support the growth and well-being of the Twin Cities area.