



Inside the Blue Rock Quarry

A tour through the proposed quarry property, with some background

Greg Marsten | Staff writer

DRESSER – Past controversies involving a proposed traprock quarry outside of Dresser have become a hot topic again, as an ownership group has proposed an operation called the Blue Rock Quarry.

The Leader has been following this story and its issues for several years, since a more extensive proposal for quarrying by the previous Kraemer Mining and Manufacturing group made headlines.

As a brief definition, traprock goes by several names, but it was formed when superhot magma cooled as it reached the Earth's surface, thousands or even millions of years ago. The unique look of the rock and the outcroppings it is known for, in places such as both versions of Interstate Park, are created by its slow erosion and the "stacking" of the various, successive lava flows. It often created bizarre, distinct stair steps, which is reportedly how it earned its name, from a Scandinavian reference to the word "trappa," meaning stair step.

That stair stepping is evident in many places on the Blue Rock property, and the various fractures and cliff walls offer a unique look into the planet's early days.

While it is beautiful to look at it and even climb, the superhard, often sharp-edged basalt has a multitude of uses in modern society, from road shoulders to railroad beds to shingles, landscaping, construction blocks, even in concrete.

But it is very heavy and dense, requiring a different type of extraction than other minerals. Traprock is almost always quarried from the top down, using outcropping and lateral quarrying instead of deep mining or digging. The issue is extracting this valuable, ultrahard and heavy mineral as affordably, and with as little lifting and earthwork, as possible.

As the issue again moves to the forefront, the Leader asked for a tour of the property to see up close what is being proposed and also what was done at the location nearly 100 years ago.

A tour through the past

The approximately 200-acre parcel in question is owned by Glyn and Cindy Thorman, Mike and Laura Loescher and Jim and Jeanne Rochford.

The Thormans offered the Leader a walking tour of the property recently, starting from the area currently used on occasion by the Trollhaugen Recreation Area for summer camping at their off-road rally and other events. Under the revised Blue Rock proposal, the camping area would be closed and moved to another part of the Trollhaugen property.

That area would possibly be used as an entrance and staging area where berms would be created for sound insulation, as well as for loading or offices. However, that camping area is zoned commercial, which would need to be addressed for any quarry operations at that location.

Glyn Thorman noted the extensive history of the property which, back in the 1920s, became a popular spot due to the discovery of relatively rare, red traprock, which led to the creation of the Scarlet Stone Company. Apparently, the discovery of the red stone might have led to the harvesting of other minerals, specifically copper, which can sometimes accompany the unique red traprock.



One of the Thorman children named this area "Cookie Crumbles" years ago, and it would stay as part of the proposed trail system on the 25-acre area proposed for a trail.

Photos by Greg Marsten



Glyn Thorman, one of the co-owners of the Blue Rock Quarry land, stands near what was once a building for the former quarry, now lost to time and the elements.

"I'm not sure if they ever found any copper," Thorman said. "We won't be looking for any, that's for sure."

The Scarlet Stone operation built at least one building on an area where the red traprock outcroppings were most visible.

"They also built a very light rail system to move the rock around," according to Thorman, who noted that just two years later the red traprock ran out and the business closed its doors. "What remained was the building foundation, portions of the rail system and the visual of an open-face surface quarry from which the original rock was removed."

While brief in lifespan, that Scarlet Stone operation evidence can be seen in several places, if you look close enough, right beside that now abandoned rail line that used to connect Dresser to Amery and points east.

That former Scarlet Stone property was purchased in 1981 and in 1995 by several of the current Blue Rock group, which also purchased an additional adjoining parcel. Thorman said they first purchased the property for recreation and deer hunting, and the couple knows the woods well.

During the tour, they would often point to areas where they've even set up for deer hunting or attempted to climb some of the outcroppings.

"(One of my daughters) named this one Cookie Crumbles," Thorman noted as he walked past an unusual outcropping, which would be part of a proposed 25-acre hiking and interpretive trail system they would develop if the quarry is approved.

The previous proposal

The current quarrying proposal first developed legs in 2003, when the current and two additional adjacent property owners were contacted by the Kraemer group to once again remove rock from the property.

Thorman outlined the process since then. "A contract was drawn up with the property owners and the operator began the task of evaluating the property for quality of rock, environmental concerns, water issues, traffic management, etc.," he noted.

After several reviews with the state and other agencies, the Kraemer group made a proposal in late 2008 to the Town of Osceola and Polk County for the necessary permits, as the bulk of the land is currently zoned A-1 Agricultural, under the Polk County Comprehensive Land Use Ordinance. The committee noted that quarrying

could qualify as a special-exception use of the land if it otherwise fell within the ordinance's special-exception definition:

"... Any use whereby the location of each such use shall be approved in writing by the Zoning Committee, or as otherwise provided by this ordinance, after public hearing and after reviewing the proposed site or sites. Such approval shall be consistent with the general purpose and intent of this ordinance and shall be based upon such evidence as may be presented at such public hearing tending to show the desirability or undesirability of specific proposed locations for the proposed use from the standpoint of the public interest because of factors as (without limitation because of enumeration) smoke, dust, noxious and toxic gases and odors, noise, vibrations from operation of heavy equipment, heavy vehicular traffic and increased traffic."

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After noting that the purpose of the ordinance is to promote the public health, safety, morale and general welfare of Polk County, and that the proposed quarry was close to homes with wells and close to the Lotus Lake area and its residents, the committee denied the Kraemer application.

The Kraemer group appealed the case to the Polk County Circuit Court, which upheld the county decision. That decision was also appealed to the state's appellate court, which upheld the original decision.

The current plan

In 2014 the existing contract with Kraemer was allowed to expire and the three landowners formed the new Blue Rock Quarry firm to seek a more amicable agreement for quarrying the property.

On the forefront is to have the Blue Rock land annexed into Dresser, which, of course, has a long history with trap-rock at the century-old Dresser Trap Rock Quarry. The owners are hoping to have the land annexed into the village and have offered a variety of incentives to make it worth the village's effort, including preferential local hiring, scholarship programs, tax relief for village residents and more, including sharing a portion of the quarry's take with the village for community projects such as a library or "hardship funding."

According to the Thormans, they want to address the other concerns raised during the initial Kraemer proposal, and promise water, well and home devaluation insurance, as well as the literal revival of the underutilized Canadian National rail line, which they say would also assure long-term use by the tourist train operation based in Osceola.

"This would help that (rail) line out and make it more viable for the future," Thorman said.

The Thormans also pointed to a number of incentives they would offer if the annexation is approved, including up to 20 quarry jobs, with preferential hiring to Dresser residents, and another 50 or so truck-driving jobs aligned with trucking companies serving the quarry. They would also offer up to 25 of the most unique acres for a proposed nature trail.

"That's important," Thorman said. "I think it would be just gorgeous, and would allow a big part of a connection between the (Stower Seven Lakes and Gandy Dancer) trails."

The Blue Rock group has stated that, in total, Dresser would see an annual donated amount from the landowners nearly matching the village's annual \$425,000 budget. They say that target amount would be paid to Dresser each year for up to 60 years.

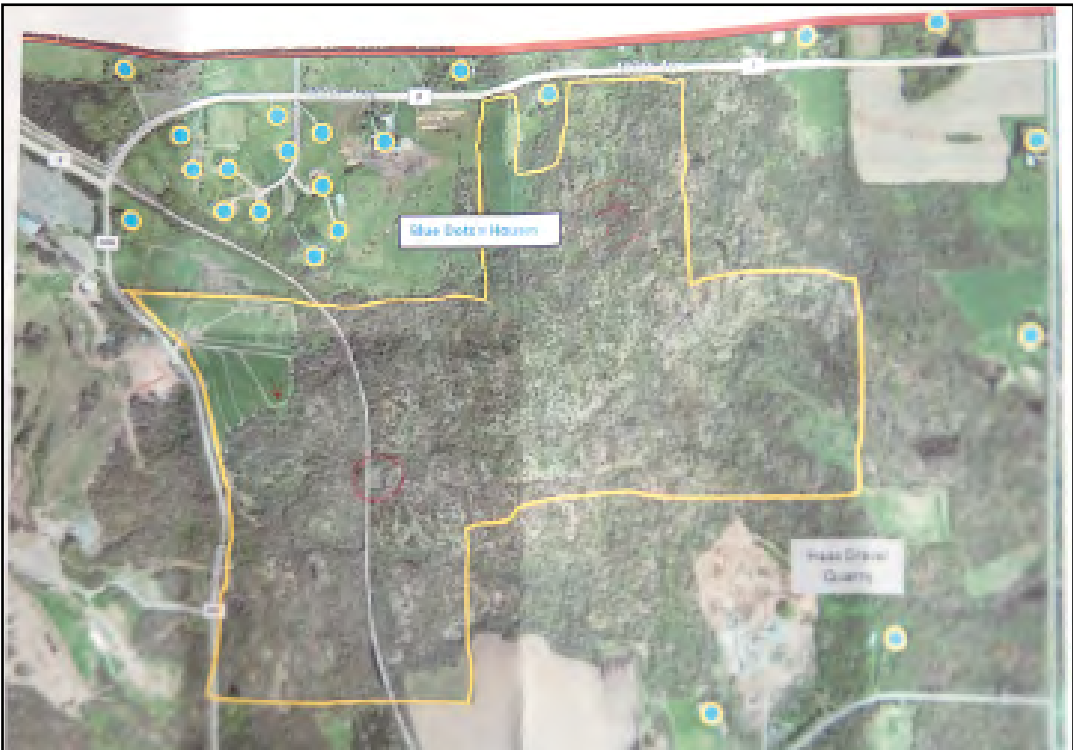
"This would be a very limited operation," Thorman said, stating that they would plan to quarry only about one acre annually, meaning the quarry would never go beyond 60 acres. "It's quite a change from the original 1920s quarry where it all started!"

The property

The proposed quarry occupies approximately 200 acres of land roughly between CTH F and CTH MM, between Trollhaugen and the current Haas Gravel Quarry to the southeast.

Even with a foot of snow on it, the land is visibly stubbled with a variety of rock outcroppings, and the Thormans pointed to one outcropping near the campground that would possibly yield an entire year's worth of product alone, up to 400,000-500,000 tons.

"Since hard rock quarries grow very slowly, the quarry



This map shows approximately where the Blue Rock Quarry would operate. The white lines are the inactive rail line, with the circled area as where the quarry operation took place in the past. The current Trollhaugen campground area, seen on the left side of the yellow highlighted area, would likely be converted to a staging area, with earthen berms to keep the operation more hidden and less intrusive. The existing Haas Gravel Quarry is just to the southeast of the proposed Blue Rock Quarry property.



This unusual facelike outcropping would be part of the Blue Rock Quarry Nature Trail. It could also be an integral part of a possible extension of the Stower Seven Lakes Trail, to connect between Lotus Lake and an area north of Dresser, with hopes for an eventual connection to the Gandy Dancer Trailhead in St. Croix Falls. — Photos by Greg Marsten

would be less than 10 acres after 10 years and grow about one acre per year until end of life, which means 140 acres will not be quarried," he said.

The Thormans noted that although it is similar in operation to the current Dresser Trap Rock Quarry, the proposed Blue Rock operation would be significantly smaller in land spread and would be "more vertical, meaning less visual and noise impacts to surrounding areas."

Once inside the Blue Rock land they hope to quarry, it is hard to see any residential housing, and they note that the operation would be sheltered by the creation of berms and existing land features.

At the location of the former Scarlet Stone Quarry, the rock walls lie within a few yards of the CN rail line, which would mean less trucking of product. But it also shows how it was harvested a century ago, likely with nitroglycerin, before hydraulics and modern quarrying machinery.

Portions of the Blue Rock land have a variety of unusual outcroppings and features, primarily on the southwest corner, in the area they hope to convert to trails and make accessible to the public. They say the long-term plan would have that area preserved as is.

"We want to be good neighbors," Cindy Thorman said, as she pointed to her favorite areas of the proposed nature trails.

They also say that any post-quarrying pits would be allowed to fill with rain and runoff water, creating several new lakes.

The Blue Rock property is indeed rugged and unusual and, while it is a controversial proposal, the owners repeatedly note that it is a dramatically different proposal from the Kraemer group's, which was much more extensive and had few internal limitations.

The Blue Rock group has often apologized for the way Kraemer handled the original proposal, and Glyn Thorman said they would "honestly address all real concerns" raised by neighbors, public officials or residents and hope to have the proposal debated in a fair public forum.

"That's all we're asking, is to be heard, to voice our opinions (on annexation)," Blue Rock co-owner Jeanne Rochford stated at a recent Dresser Village Board meeting.

It is impossible to deny that the land in question has a rich history of traprock quarrying. The reality of modern, residential developments nearby can be seen as a conflict by those residents, who are likely to be against any such operation in their neighborhoods regardless of the conditions, benefits or possible job and tax relief.

However, the reality of residential development, in general, has itself created demands in the traprock industry and, to some effect, those nearby residential developments themselves are driving the demand for the dense rock, either through road maintenance, landscaping or even with their roofing and concrete.

Regardless of the history, incentives and more, the debate over the Blue Rock Quarry and any possible annexation or approval is likely to be a divisive and emotional issue. It highlights the distinct perspectives of private landowners with a product they want to harvest and sell and the people who want their nearby properties and local area to stay static and unblemished.

It is a classic confrontation that has been at the forefront of development for decades, with few people in the middle.



The former rail line lies right beside much of the proposed quarry operation, and would handle the bulk of the off-site loading, to reduce truck traffic through or near Dresser.



The proposed quarry operation would utilize only outcropping rock, such as this pile near the planned access area.