



Arlene Soxie tells representatives from Graphite One that "you can't eat money, but you can eat the food that you put away," at a community meeting held on May 22, 2025. Ben Townsend photo.

'You can't eat money': Residents challenge Graphite One on proposed mine's environmental impacts

May 23, 2025 • Ben Townsend

For just over a decade, Graphite One has convened community meetings on the Seward Peninsula to discuss its proposed graphite mine just 36 miles north of Nome. The Canadian mining company is inching closer to entering operations and just this spring [completed an extensive feasibility study](#).

The Graphite Creek property, while known for its proximity to the western Alaska hub of Nome, is just 27 miles from the villages of Teller and Brevig Mission. The abandoned village of Mary's Igloo, now used as a summer fish camp, is just 17 miles to the northeast. All three rely on the nearby Imuruk Basin, the largest watershed on the Seward Peninsula, for subsistence fishing and transportation.

This sensitive relationship between the land and those that rely on it has been at the center of opposition to the mine. The company's annual meetings give residents of Nome, Teller and Brevig Mission a chance to share their thoughts and concerns directly with senior management.

The first round of questions for Graphite One staff came an hour into Thursday night's meeting at Old St. Joe's Church. Austin Ahmasuk questioned Graphite One's Environmental and Permitting Manager, Ed Fogel, over the acidity of water in creeks leading into the Imuruk Basin.

"You said it was very low pH in the upper portion. How low was it?" Austin Ahmasuk questioned.



Austin Ahmasuk questions Graphite One over its water quality testing. Ben Townsend photo.

Fogel said the pH was "as low as 4" and insisted he would need to look at the data to confirm. Austin Ahmasuk demanded Graphite One share the data, to which Fogel said Graphite One would.

Alora Stasenko, a junior at Nome-Beltz Middle High School, then questioned Graphite One over the presence of pyrite in the deposit, which can create harmful sulfuric acid. She then asked how prepared Graphite One was to process other potentially harmful byproducts created by mining.

"When you commingle all the water and all the tailings and everything, are you positive that the filtration system is going to be able to keep up with the demand?" Stasenko asked.



Nome-Beltz Middle High School student, Alora Stasenko, listens as Graphite One's Mike Schaffner responds to a question. Ben Townsend photo.

Graphite One's Senior VP of Operations, Mike Schaffner, said the mine's water treatment plant would be capable of handling a "100 year event" like 2022's ex-Typhoon Merbok.

"Now, can the water treatment plant treat it to the quality? Absolutely, because these are the same treatment plants that you're using to make drinking water with," Schaffner said.

Graphite One resumed its presentation, detailing specifics from its feasibility study, including plans to operate the mine year-round with just 11 days off for extraordinary weather conditions.

A road linking the mine to Nome would be plowed through the winter for semi-trucks to safely travel. During the summer, the graphite would be loaded on massive self-loading ships and transported to British Columbia, where a train to a new processing plant in Ohio awaits.

Accessing the proposed mine, subsistence lands



A member of the audience traces a pen along the route of a proposed access road through Mosquito Pass. Ben Townsend photo.



Keith Conger shares concerns over Graphite One's helicopter operations. Ben Townsend photo.

Another contentious point among the audience was the mine's proposed access road. The 17 mile long road would split from the Kougarak Highway at mile post 30, then head northwest through Mosquito Pass. The shallow split in the Kigluaik Mountains is a known raptor habitat and is frequented by subsistence users.

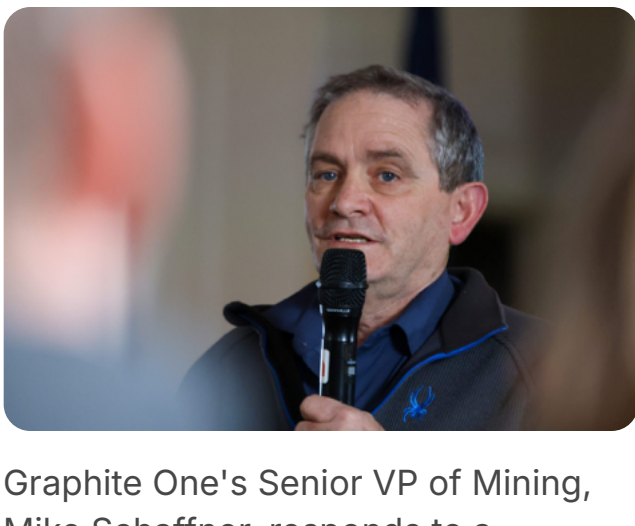
Graphite One's Subsistence Advisory Council, which includes members from several tribes across the Seward Peninsula, recommended the access road be private. Schaffner said while they plan to heed the recommendation from the council, the public would still be able to access the land around the road just as they are now.

"So if I were to go out there and hunt, I wouldn't be able to drive on the road, but I can go around the road. Is that what you're saying?" Kerry Ahmasuk asked.

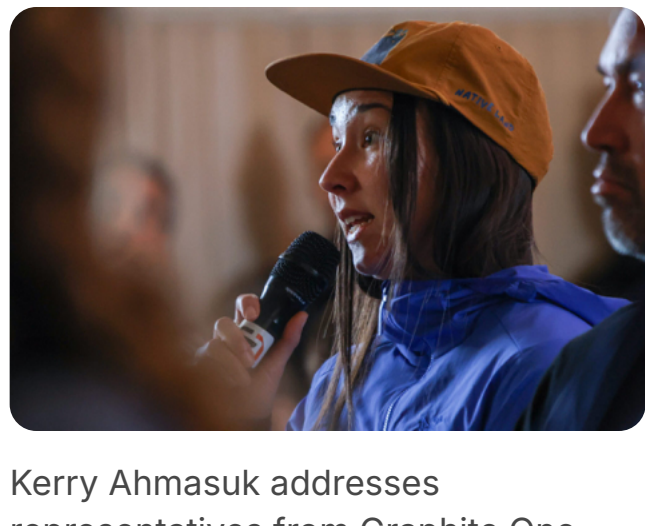
"You can do exactly what you've done in the past, yes," Schaffner said in response.



Valerie Fuller listens as a member of the audience addresses Graphite One's proposed mine. Ben Townsend photo.



Graphite One's Senior VP of Mining, Mike Schaffner, responds to a question. Ben Townsend photo.



Kerry Ahmasuk addresses representatives from Graphite One. Ben Townsend photo.

Earlier in the evening, Kerry Ahmasuk read a statement detailing how important living a subsistence lifestyle is to Indigenous peoples. She shared her frustration over the mine's potential to destroy the Kigluaik Mountains "for the sake of profit".

"Why is it that Indigenous people are always the ones having to face these consequences when these outside organizations come and go as they please?" Kerry Ahmasuk said. "I want us all to ask ourselves, is this really profit? When our lands are ruined in the process, our waters undrinkable."

She demanded transparency from Graphite One over the potential consequences of the mine.

"I am wholeheartedly opposed to your mine. Our ancestral lands deserve to be a place of ceremony and deserve to be honored for providing our people since time immemorial," she said.

One of three Nome Common Council members present, Maggie Miller took a turn on the microphone to commend a group of high school students in attendance.



Maggie Miller commends students participating in the evening meeting. Ben Townsend photo.

"Thank you for coming because this is your future and this is my future. This is what's happening, whether it's Graphite One, IPOP, the mine that's coming here shortly on the other side of Martinsonville. This is the reality, and many of you are subsistence users, just like I am," Miller said.

From the other side of the room, Arlene Soxie told of her childhood when she was first taught to respect the land and water.

"It really scares me when I think about people ruining our land, our rivers, our oceans. It scares me because the food will deplete," Soxie said. "Animals depend on the food from the land too, and so do people, and the one that you love, that money, it won't feed you. You can't eat money, but you can eat the food that you put away."

Arlene Soxie leans back in her chair with her arms folded as Graphite One presents the results of its feasibility study. Ben Townsend photo.

Before beginning operations, a long permitting process awaits Graphite One, the exact number Fogel said is in the hundreds.

"If we get denied any one of these permits, then our projects dead in the water. We cannot operate," Fogel explained.

Schaffner told the audience to "not feel defeated" by the proposed mine, which one audience member likened to an unstoppable "freight train".

"People have used this land forever, and they cannot live without the subsistence. And if we can't show that, we can put this in without harming those resources, we will not get a permit, and we should not get a permit. That's how the system needs to work," Schaffner said.

Graphite One intends to file a Section 404 permit application this year, which will kick off what it expects to be a multi-year process to receive every permit it needs to enter operations. Graphite One's feasibility study projects construction beginning in 2029, with operations starting the year after

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