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Angry opposition to winery 'event centers' on coast

By Chris McManus
Sonoma County's Permit and Resource Management District (PRMD) didn't anticipate the firestorm of public opposition to one change in its preliminary draft of the Local Coastal Plan update when it scheduled four public workshops on the revisions. In fact its original presentation and the first few workshops didn't even talk about the controversial changes to the Agriculture section.

But letters like Will Guyan's "Protections gutted" in the Aug. 28 ICO and the OpEd "Stealth Move on the Sonoma Coast," by Rueben Weinzveg in the Sept. 1 Sonoma County Gazette have complained loudly about a provision that would allow a proliferation of vineyards and wineries with event centers on the coast.

Organizations like Preserve Rural Sonoma County and Coastal
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Hills Rural Preservation have been mobilizing public opinion, and Monday an overflow crowd, many wearing "Save Our Coast" signs, packed the meeting room at the Timber Cove Fire Department to give PRMD staffers an earful. The Timber Cove workshop had been added to the schedule of road shows and this public comment period extended by four

weeks to address the growing dissatisfaction on the coast.

Sandi Potter, Comprehensive Planning Manager at PRMD, was barely into her Power Point presentation before former Sonoma County Supervisor Ernie Carpenter and others began interrupting with comments about the Agriculture section of the proposed update.

Many opposing the changes to the Local Coastal Plan are the same people who opposed the expansion of printing facilities at nearby Ratna Ling Retreat Center and are still fighting that issue in court.

But while the California wine industry might have money, so far it hasn't showed up for this fight with organized groups of speakers and attorneys like Ratna Ling did at similar Sonoma County governmental meetings. No one at Monday night's meeting spoke in favor of the changes that would allow the winery event centers on the coast.

Jennifer Barrett, Deputy Planning Director, told attendees her agency was hearing residents' concerns. "I hear

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put new language in the draft or write a range of policy options for the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors.

The County is near the beginning of an approximately 18-month process of updating the Local Coastal Plan. That process will include another draft with another comment period and

that you're not happy with the draft," she said. "This is not a fait accompli."

She added that a lot of issues with vineyards and tasting rooms have been raised in inland parts of the county as well. "The question we need to address is 'is viticultural tourism appropriate on the coast?'"

But Barrett said the current Local Coastal Plan already allows for vineyards, with a Vineyard Erosion and Sediment Control Ordinance (VESCO) permit, and for wineries and tasting rooms with a use permit and or coastal permit. "Preventing event centers on the coast is going to take more than just keeping the current language," she said.

"What do we need to do to influence the draft," asked Bruce Johnson. "Do we need to give you numbers and angry people kicking your asses? Do more letters count?"

But Barrett urged people to send their input, including specific language changes if they desired, and said all comments would be considered. She added that PRMD would either

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public hearings at the Planning Commission, the Board of Supervisors and ultimately the California Coastal Commission.

The complete preliminary draft can be found at sonoma-county.org/prmd/docs/coastal/. Comments can be submitted to PRMD-LCP-Update@sonoma-county.org or by U.S. mail to PRMD, 2550 Ventura Avenue, Santa Rosa, California, 95403.