

Readers Speak Out – North Bay Biz

Thank you for the March article outlining community issues caused by Winery Events and cumulative impacts on neighborhoods.

It was gratifying to hear land use professionals clearly articulate the requirement that wineries comply with their use permit conditions.

By way of background, In October 2016, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution tasking the Permit Department to develop and implement protective guidelines, policies, and standards to address promotional events and overconcentration of tasting rooms in certain rural areas. Since that resolution, the Board has delayed taking action to implement an effective and enforceable Winery Event Ordinance. However, Sonoma County officials continue to approve new winery and event center use permits, exacerbating the negative cumulative impacts they had committed to address.

Of particular concern is the quote from Tennis Wick, director of Permit Sonoma, “As a planner, I think when communities solve their own problems, using professional guidance where necessary, knowing their community better than we do, why not let them come up with their own solutions? That’s happened in Dry Creek...”

The County has handed the responsibility for formulating these regulations off to the local vintners and residents to sort out.

This approach raises serious issues.

In the Dry Creek example the voting structure of committee that approve and implement the guidelines gives wine industry representatives an effective veto of any meaningful standards or limitations that they do not feel meet their interests.

The statement that “the community” wrote the Dry Creek Guidelines is only partially true. The reality is that the framework and definitions are directly from the Vintner organization’s proposals. Thus, the Dry Creek Guidelines do not solve the problems recognized by the Supervisors; they in fact increase entitlements to daily events and loosen standards for food service, increasing entitlements over what has been approved by the County in the past.

Allowing unlimited numbers of certain types of events and daily food service, which has the potential to create de facto restaurants, will significantly increase visitation. Yet, no impact studies have been performed by the County or even any consideration been given to increased traffic levels, impacts on surrounding properties and further commercialization of this very rural area.

In addition, there are no limitations on the total number of facilities in a given area. The cities of Sonoma and Healdsburg have both enacted limitations to the

number of tasting rooms in their downtown areas to address overconcentration. As was the case with Sonoma and Healdsburg without some defined standards in the areas that are currently concentrated, they become magnets for further development as business seek to locate in such high visitation areas to promote their brand, further eroding rural character and exacerbating traffic and noise impacts.

The residents have respectfully requested observable and enforceable definitions, and protective standards drafted by Permit Sonoma with required hearings including full representation by all the stakeholders. It is the County's responsibility to draft the guidelines that become regulations enforceable by the County rather than having an industry draft its own guidelines, with unenforceable definitions.

The result of following Mr. Wick's "let the community draft their own solutions" process is that the County's own General Plan, Zoning Code and environmental protections are trumped by guidelines that increase the intensity of use drafted by the Wine Industry members. Again, the voting structure effectively silences neighbor's legitimate requests for measures to protect their safety, water availability and quality of life, without the enforcement powers of the County.

Up until recently the staff of the Sonoma County planning department has worked to solicit input from stakeholder groups that included both resident groups and winery representatives. In 2015 - 2016 the County held meetings with stakeholders, had public workshops and briefings to the County planning bodies and the Board of Supervisors. These staff's efforts should continue. The County is the proper legislative body to address land use conflicts and environmental issues, and while input from industry and neighborhood groups is important, it is really our county officials who need to step up and get the job done.

In an overcrowded market, as each player competes for brand recognition and market share, we have seen an arms race for ever more customer experiences. The proliferation of uses that historically are permitted in towns, not agricultural areas, has resulted in evermore commercialization of agricultural lands. While some, appear to suggest that parties and food service ARE agriculture, the Sonoma County General Plan clearly states that visitor serving uses are be limited in scale and intensity in agriculturally zoned areas.

If done properly we can have a thriving wine visitor industry that supports healthy agriculture in a way that preserves the very reason tourists come to wine country in the first place – rural character. That is what good planning should be about.

The bottom line is that the County is responsible to the entire community when it comes to safety, environmental and quality of life concerns, and turning the process over to industry dominated committees to promulgate regulations is not fulfilling a proper governmental function. We see the same kind of thing happening in Washington DC when industry titans and lobbyists are appointed

heads of agencies created to regulate those industries; the result is gutting of public and consumer protections.

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