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4/15/16

“Tourism can only be sustainable if it is carefully managed so that potential negative effects on the host community and the environment are not permitted to outweigh the financial benefits.”

<http://traveltips.usatoday.com/positive-negative-effects-tourism-63336.html>

Pretty much in Sonoma all we have heard about are tourism’s benefits. Boosters and government like the wine-tourism-hospitality combine because it benefits them. Those who benefit do not want to hear anything about costs. The more that legitimate cost problems are ignored, the more these have become accentuated.

There seems to be a small opening now with the acknowledgment of affordable housing as a serious countywide issue. This is a chance to begin a dialogue about the costs and benefits of our regional flavor of tourism economy as a whole.

The way the current dialogue has gone, residents in Sonoma have been reduced to fighting back in disjointed turf battles here and there. Citizens have struggled to be heard. The discourse has been very dissatisfying because frankly, for a very long time government has not listened and resident’s concerns for limits have been minimized. The way the wine tasting on the Plaza issue unfolded is a good case in point; citizens could not prevail on the Planning Commission or the city council to even get a use permit process. A wine industry future won out over local, residential preferences for the heart of town.

In Sonoma many conflicts erupt over land use in the Plaza area, the heart of town. These conflicts are so great and urgent because what is at stake is the ownership of town itself. Who will define the future?

As with other tourist locales the control of development and the town’s future has been concentrated in a few powerful private hands along with government officials interested in econ development. As Dr. Samuel Mendlinger said about imbalanced tourism economics at a recent NapaVision 20150 conference, “money does the talking.”

Costs that can be directly related to tourism are: general price inflation, higher rents, skyrocketing property values, and demographic imbalances that run counter to having a vibrant, sustainable community. Populations of haves and have nots become socially and economically isolated. In Sonoma this has been coming on since the late 1980s in a calculated economic development plan to turn the region into “Wine Country.”

Further costs are increased traffic and GHG footprint from workers who have to drive in from areas where they can afford to live. This same Sonoma-like pattern pattern can be seen in Woodstock, VT and Aspen, CO.

Conflicts arise between tourism boosters and locals as to who will control the future and the town's development. The result on the ground has been that tourism has brought social disruption to Sonoma. There has been an accelerated economic polarization of working class/ older locals and wealthy tourists/businesses/ and landlords. Boosters say *change* is inevitable. Residents want a conversation about how such change will unfold.

In Sonoma, shops that used to serve residents and the needs of people who live in the community morphed into boutique tourist stores. High priced hotels and restaurants began to dominate the economy. Prices ran up all around.

Working locals, affluent locals and recent immigrants want to preserve the small town character. There gets to be a burn the bridge, NIMBY aspect to this. Tourism boosters are interested in preserving a façade of character. Boosters want a four lane bridge straight to town.

There is a familiar pattern: the town is nice, it has a milieu, it is preserved. Then people start coming, first hipsters, then yuppies, then the big \$. There is a gradual shift to cater to the wealthy; business becomes higher end, residential construction becomes higher end. Land values inflate. There starts to be pressure for land use and zoning changes that results in more commercial/ tourist uses. Poorer folks get run out. Struggles to define zoning are great because land use defines the tone of the town's values. Residents see their town changing but find they have no effective voice to direct, limit and control that change.

"Money does the talking".

What this amounts to, from a planning perspective, is that residents are advocating the preservation of a genuine society and community; tourism boosters are advocating the preservation of a money making economic formula. When these two frames are set one against the other, this turns town planning into one big fight.

The locals start to not be able to afford it. There comes a split between affluent tourists and newcomers, and the working class and older locals. The more tourist influence, the more polarization. Housing and wage negatives get externalized to other communities like American Canyon and Fairfield, out of sight, out of mind.

As young people, locals and the workforce move out there gets to be less need for schools as there are less and less school age kids, less voters willing to pay for bonds. The town gets older. Tourism brings a predictable demographic shift. We see all these trends in Sonoma.

In reckoning the flavor of local tourism, the background cultural ethos sets the stage for how issues of socio-econ planning unfold. In the US this background is generally competitive and individualistic. In the Bay Area we have a liberal political feel that is

also mixed with dot.com and Silicon Valley entrepreneurial spirit. Bay Area entrepreneurialism has a superficial tone of anti-establishment and social justice but this has clearly morphed back into more of a Social Darwinism, free market individualism that avoids senses of social responsibility. Thus, residents half-formed desire for integral, holistic planning is up against boosters with resources with beliefs in a *laissez faire* economics, which is anti-planning.

This background cultural ethos is overlaid onto the demographics as a whole. Older local ag and resource extraction-based populations find themselves forced to change by circumstance. Everyone except the boosters finds themselves having to change by circumstance.

Sonoma County has a history of pushing back against uncontrolled growth. A county environmental movement began by fighting off a nuclear power plant at Bodega Head. We have green separators and growth boundaries. Also in place are social justice movements like the NBOB, Jobs with Justice as well as a multitude of charities and social service organizations like La Luz, the Vintage House, FISH and the Sonoma Valley Fund.

In Sonoma Valley there is a particular charity dynamic. Groups of well-off residents support a charity network that the local non-profits depend upon. This has created a system where people who know the exact scope of tourism economy negatives and costs are scared to speak out or they may lose funding. The people who fund the charities are the same ones who have benefitted from an imbalanced and socially unjust system. The upshot: symptoms get addressed and root causes and needed systemic changes are not spoken of by anyone but a few Bernie types. Government abdicates its role as an arbiter of public good and sloughs this off to the private sphere that then trickles wealth back in the form of charity.

The charity formula does represent the actions of people with a conscience. But, what it does is to allow the unhealthy aspects of the combine to go along unfettered. The more the combine prevails, the more then need for charity and government safety net aid.

The wine-tourism-hospitality combine came on in the late 1980s and gradually ramped up and in the process displaced the old ag milieu before it. As the old small town, traditional social fabric deteriorated, new economic opportunities opened up with a consequent loss of power by the locals to outsiders and tourists.

Small vegetable farmers and historic mixed ag holdings are now an endangered species in an ocean of grape monoculture on land that costs \$125,000 an acre. Early on in the push to make "wine county", uncontrolled hillside vineyard development had major environmental effects on soil erosion. Large-scale land use changes to grape monoculture resulted in deforestation and groundwater depletion.

This is all part of a complex cost/ benefit to our regional society that should be part of wide-open and honest discussion. The benefits have mostly accrued to a few. The many costs and negatives have become obscured by micro arguments and pitched battles that don't allow us all to develop a macro view and to define sustainable policy going forward.

This is the critical juncture, who gets to define the questions and answers as to what is going on here? Who makes the zoning and why? We need a true cost accounting frame, as a basis to change the channel and to establish an inclusive dialogue among all actors.

As the combine has evolved, agro-tourism in Sonoma County is less and less about agriculture per se and more of a formulaic business. We have to call a spade a spade and come to terms with this change. An ag to business transition has occurred. This is why there is such tremendous land use pressure for *events*, weddings, restaurants, etc. in rural areas. Ag has had to morph to business to compete with the in-town model of concentrated Plaza tasting rooms backed up by warehouse production and shipping clubs. The combine is a bonanza fueled by the wealthy trying to get in on the wine-tourism-hospitality action from all sides. Local's voices are drowned out and powerful money pushes land use changes through government agencies and average citizens have little chance to keep up or to be heard.

The debate about tourism and any acknowledgement of its negative externalities is won by those who frame and phrase the questions. Who defines benefits? To who? Short term or long term? In a pragmatic real way, city and county commissioners and electeds are put in place on the basis of whether they support or challenge the combine.

A lot of how this all unfolds simply reflects the power structure in our area and it is worth it to shine a light on what and who exactly this is. The political structure is influenced by money. We know this. Follow the money. Who is it who wants all the hotels and new event centers? Which supervisorial districts/ cities are getting all the land use changes? Who are the electeds and commissioners who vote yay? Who are the owners?

Are locals being listened to? If government officials, staff and electeds don't listen, citizens have two choices, one is to start a grassroots, bottom up movement, two is to vote and appoint them out.

It is very rare for top down planning to foster sustainable plans because the interests at the top are too often focused on short-term returns and on short-term political calculus. Ultimately the planning takes into account only a few, the investors and stockholders, the tax revenue and supposed multipliers. Hence we get economic analyses that show only benefits and where government should be the entity to call costs into question, often times it is citizens who have to beg to be heard regarding a fair accounting of the negatives and to see the whole picture.

In places where top down forward-looking tourism has occurred, like the Balearic Islands, this has been because local leaders had a solid long-term view of the benefits for all; they thought of everyone's needs.

For tourism to be healthy and sustainable, the benefits have to pay out over a long time and not unfold in an urgent, bonanza atmosphere. Let's define some terms here, in Sonoma do we have tourism or do we have hospitality? What is the difference?

Economic development through *tourism* is sustainable and complete, socially, economically and environmentally. This method uses the triple bottom line with full cost accounting. *Hospitality* is incomplete; it is service oriented, econ bottom line only, it is heavily advertised and "pushed"; you get tour operators, and a cheap, generic experience. Hospitality is formulaic, Disneyland-like. Hospitality zeros in on a particular service, usually hotels and restaurants. Hospitality demands cheap labor: dishwashers, line cooks, and hotel cleaners. A hospitality focus eventually results in imbalanced demographics, more seniors, young people leaving and worker unaffordability. Hospitality takes on a J-curve growth pattern that is destined to crash. The Tourism Improvement District (TID) focus in Sonoma is exactly on hospitality and nothing more, a \$700,000 a year city tax allocation to put heads in beds, but not to think of any systemic, long term planning that would benefit the whole community or to offset the community costs.

Planned tourism is going to take into account the needs of all and ensure that these needs are provided for. In Sonoma Valley, through the evidence of multiple and serious negative externalities, we see that the needs of all are not provided for, and thus we have a primarily hospitality centered economy. This even though Sonoma has many of the inherent qualities that could provide for a sustainable tourism economy.

In Sonoma the hospitality focus spills over onto the Plaza where landlords charge exorbitant rents to boutique stores geared to tourists only. The upshot, locals are disenfranchised from their own center of town. The city then has pathetic "shop local" campaigns, as if we had a town actually geared to residents. The workforce does not shop in Sonoma if it can help it.

Tourism has a *pull factor* deriving from a unique local milieu. Tourism develops a whole slate of attractions: art, museums, festivals, hikes, history, and ag. Tourists go looking for an adventure, for something to discover, a unique and genuine experience, to make memories, to meet real locals, to have a cultural exchange. Tourism is econ development that makes cultural/ geographic products not simply services. Tourism creates and shares widespread wealth and locals are respected and included.

Sonoma then, has a hospitality focus overlaid upon actual tourism attractions. We have a Visitor's Bureau and a TID but we don't have a forum to take citizen input nor a conscious plan that includes citizens. Citizens are buffeted from one development project to the next without benefit of a sense of overall planning and inclusion. The city's General Plan has many citizen-centered values. Yet, developers drive the planning process and citizens are forced to react on a piecemeal basis. What we lack in Sonoma is a sense that the whole community is involved in a productive discussion about the future of the town.

When we get a hospitality hotel project come up and the developer makes an econ bottom line only analysis of benefits and no costs, who is it up to, to raise the issue of systemic costs? Why is it like pulling teeth to get officials to think and speak in terms of sustainability, a triple bottom line and full cost accounting? Planning commissioners who do are bullied to recuse themselves for bias? It's obvious in our local government that we have commissioners and council members who are allied with the top, short-term hospitality money and we have others who are more sympathetic to hearing what citizens have to say about sustainability. This tension usually unfolds along ideological lines of free market vs. regulation. What is really at stake is an inclusive process where citizen involvement is honored and included in an overall larger discourse about the collective future of town.

Given that Sonoma is essentially built out, the last battles here are about whether future vision will tip to a triple bottom line view or an econ bottom line only view? What will the new UGB look like in 2020? Will the edge be pushed for more combine commercial bonanza or can land use planning account for benefits for all? For the rest of Sonoma Valley, the game is on and it is not too late to change the channel. The Springs Specific Plan will be a test of how the future gets framed (can we get a Grocery Outlet?). Whether we get huge bottling facilities and event centers in the south valley where groundwater is already drawn down will show county resolve or not.

In terms of current planning, locals want to be involved, they want planning to be intentional, to have the potential for system-wide benefit that thoughtful and educated citizens can buy into, that the working class can buy into, that will be healthy for the environment, watershed and GHG footprint. Citizens want to be heard, listened to and honored, not called a vocal minority by the wealthy who resent any effort of citizens to have a say in the future of their town and region. In places where the money does the talking, like the Greek Islands, or maybe Sonoma, the result has been a cheapened, hospitality-based mess that has undisputable costs that are assiduously ignored by the top few who mold the future.

Most citizens don't really have an idea of how long-term needs, costs and benefits may play out. Many times people end up voting against their own interests, bamboozled by slick spin from the wealthy few. Low hotel wages for example, are not a good long-term benefit. Low wages, high prices and a workforce forced to commute in from other areas is not a sustainable economy.

What we need is a SonomaVision 2050. We have the ingredients. We have a group of interested, active, well-educated citizens with experience in how the government and development process works. We have the wisdom, experience, perseverance and insight to negotiate the bureaucratic maze and to speak our minds. What we lack is to have our voices be heard, and a sense that we are shaping how things get done. We already know how real life works, we just need our version of it to be heard as an equal voice. Some local citizens provide this depth very well.

A local coalition for Sonoma Valley would be good, one like NapaVision 2050, with members such as for example: Valley of the Moon Alliance, SEC, El Verano School, the Grange, Transition Sonoma Valley, the Methodist Spiritual Action Committee, the Congregational Earth Care Committee etc. etc., groups and individuals who share a desire to see planning be more integral and sustainable. This coalition would allow for alternative voices to be heard on an equal basis to top power structure voices. We have a cosmopolitan, well-educated community here. The people who want a deep discussion on the future of Sonoma and the context of tourism are not mere gadflies who are seeking to gum up the works. These people care deeply about the town they live in and have much to offer a thoughtful discussion.

Let the discussion begin. A good first step: a forum where all the diverse actors in our society and economy come together and speak their piece. The goal: We all listen and digest and seek to understand what motivates the others, try to create some good will as a basis for further discussion and planning. As Joseph McIntyre of AgInnovations said, bring an open heart and an open mind. I'm sure there are aspects I and all other actors don't know about, that we could have our eyes opened to.

We've got a dysfunctional dynamic going on now, an adversarial context that prevents progress for systemic and inclusive planning. What we need to see is if our leaders are more interested in business development for the short-term profit of a few or for a higher quality of life for all citizens and for our whole system?

How are we going to reduce systemic tourism combine costs to be more in line with actual community benefits?

This essay is based on my notes from a NapaVision 2050 lecture by Dr. Samuel Mendlinger and Eben Fodor.

(The change in lack of services to locals has been used as a wedge issue by developers to try and bring in big box stores and chains which locals don't want either. In Sonoma this has resulted in a historic overlay zone to protect the ostensible *character* of the Plaza area. )