

Report from Preserve Rural Sonoma County – Padi Selwyn

PRSC launched a coalition back in October, inspired by Napa's Vision coalition. We have about 15 members, most representing other organizations including Rural Alliance, Sonoma County Water Coalition, Preserve's Dairyman steering committee, Sonoma County Conservation Action, Greenbelt Alliance, VOTMA among others. We are meeting monthly, and right now, our main goal is to influence the PRMD as they draft new ordinances and standards for the wine industry.

Our first initiative was to mobilize community members to attend the November 16 PRMD public workshop on winery/event center issues. We were successful in packing the house, as was the wine industry. However, our side had many more attendees, and many spoke very articulately at the event. The press we received was extensive, with PRSC being quoted in headlines that we were trying to stop the Napafication of Sonoma County. Media coverage was balanced and our perspective well represented in all the articles published.

Prior to the meeting, the Sonoma County Winegrape Commission sent out mobilization emails to their 1800 members, wherein they urged members to write to the Board of Supervisors, encouraging them to send out suggested letters filled with malicious and false accusations. They included 4 letter templates in their email.

Their letter templates accused the residents and neighbors of wineries and event centers of being 'liars and bullies'.

Their prepared letters include these outrageous excerpts:

"... our opponents never let these facts get in the way of their selfish effort to kill small businesses. "

"Clearly, some rural residents have sought to bully people into opposing the local wine industry by making wild allegations or outright lying about us."

"It seems our opposition simply does not want people to visit Sonoma County and spend their money with local

businesses. It appears they want to build a wall around the region and keep people away."

PRSC's emails to our supporters asked them to attend and be respectful at the public meeting, no hooting or jeering, and suggested they email Tennis Wick, the PRMD Director with their concerns. This turned out to be a good move, as we learned that Wick shared both emails (the vitriolic wine industry one and ours) with Supervisor Gore and expressed his displeasure at the wine industry's communication.

A good lesson for us all to take the high road!

The wine industry is trying to deflect the debate away from the real issues of the need for balanced standards, mutual respect for neighbors and compliance with our laws by attacking concerned citizens and local residents. The Vintner's stated at the public workshop that they " will oppose any effort to limit winery activities and events", despite the fact that county staff is now working hard to develop balanced zoning standards that address the intensity, scale and concentration of visitor-serving and hospitality activities as directed by the Board of Supervisors.

While we await the PRMD's draft which goes to the Planning Commission in January, we will continue to send letters to the local editors, write op/ed pieces, encourage our supporters to write to the PRMD and share the message that "Event centers in the wrong locations are not in the best interest of Sonoma County remaining a premier destination. Sonoma County has benefited from over-development and the diminished tourist experience in Napa County – let's not make the same mistakes."

Our communications is stressing that "We are not the enemies of the wine industry. We are their neighbors and their customers".

Sadly, the Sonoma County Winegrape Commission only seems focused on attacking those of us supporting meaningful standards through the normal county procedures for public input. It is unfortunate that this industry group has chosen the low road in this debate. We believe their smear campaign reflects very poorly on the Sonoma County Winegrape Commission and its leadership.

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