



Vintners need to do a little rethinking

Greg Simon/Community Matters

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The Vintners' Association's recent decision to hold the 2012 Vintners' Festival on Camp 4 puts the association at odds with most residents and the Valley's core retail businesses.

This decision firmly connects the Santa Ynez Valley wine industry to the aspirations of the Chumash tribe's desire to take the 1,400 acres of Camp 4 from fee to trust. This is a community issue that is hot and extremely controversial.

An alignment of the Vintners' Association and the Chumash will do nothing positive for the wine industry's image in the Valley — a Valley that now sees the tasting rooms as a growing menace to quiet, rural, residential enjoyment.

The proliferation of tasting rooms throughout the Valley and the charade of masking a small Tier I winery as a large Tier III to allow unreasonable allocations to tasting rooms and their accompanying entertainment venues is now getting ready for county review. The excess can no longer be ignored.

Locating tasting rooms in the designated retail-zoned business districts will produce benefits for adjoining retailers, restaurants, hotels, etc., not to mention relieving Valley residents of dealing with the invasiveness of mixing non-compatible business uses with the rural residential atmosphere and quality we all sought in making this our home.

It clearly is an affront to area residents who would have Baseline Avenue clogged with thousands of vehicles during the festival, as well as the set-up days before and after. Baseline, while a rural road, is still the arterial allowing the majority of residents east of Highway 154 unfettered access to their homes.

And what about the existing retail business core in our Valley that could use and add to the overall experience? Buellton wants to host this event, or it could be held in Solvang. Regardless of which one might be selected, many of our local businesses would have the benefit of enjoying the additional patronage.

Pegging this festival to the far end of the Valley, in a rural residential area, effectively destroys the mutual benefit that could be achieved.

Both Napa and Paso Robles held their festivals in the commercial core of their towns, over a two-day period, again making the event mutually beneficial rather than exclusionary.

One has only to look at the Napa Valley experience, with their proliferation of wineries, to understand potential outcomes. Napa realized only after the fact that the tasting room venues were strangling the rest of their valley, their roads and communities. In addition, they were directing tourists and business potential out of the valley's commercial business areas. The restrictions then put in place directed wine tasting and event activity into the commercial districts.

Napa only recognized these problems after the fact. The horse was out of the barn.

Well, the horse is still in the barn for us, but if we do not act now, it will be too late for our Valley.

Our rural Valley, which welcomed the wine industry as an agricultural component, is now waking up to the elements that are going too far adrift, and residents are speaking up.

The Vintners' Association can be a positive participant and a leader, or put itself in opposition to residential neighbors and therefore against how this Valley views itself today and in the future.

Community Matters explores local topics of public interest. Longtime resident Greg Simon of Santa Ynez is a retired business executive.