

ITS OFFICIAL, THIS LETTER HAS BEEN SENT. Thanks to all!

April 15, 2010

To: Members of the Board of Zoning Adjustments
Permit and Resource Management Department
2550 Ventura Avenue
Santa Rosa, California 95403

Re: Fort Ross Wine Tasting Room
15001 Meyers Grade Road
UPE09-0027

We are using this opportunity to challenge the proposed Adoption of a Mitigated Negative Declaration, for the Fort Ross Wine Tasting Room application, based upon the directives contained in the Sonoma County General Plan/Sonoma Coast/Gualala Basin, Objective LU-10.4:

"Limit the scale of any new visitor and tourist oriented uses and confine them primarily to existing communities and existing locations. Assure that they are compatible with and protect the area's natural, undeveloped scenic character. Avoid these uses along roads between Highway 1 and Warm Springs Dam."

Further, LU-10g instructs that additional tourist oriented uses should:

"avoid new designations outside of existing communities with such facilities."

Also, the Policy Framework in Section 2 contains these additional, important, land use directives. Under Section 2.1.1:

"The main thrust of this debate is the extent of development which can occur without exceeding the carrying capacity of the natural environment, substantially lessening the quality of life for residents, or overloading public services such as roads, sewer and water supply, and criminal justice and public health facilities."

This proposal for a new wine tasting facility, located at 15001 Meyers Grade Road, does not meet any of these General Plan Land Use criteria. In fact, a previous proposal for a tasting room, at the Flowers Vineyard, located at 28500-28505 Seaview Road, just north of the Schwartz Vineyard, was denied.

The BZA Conditions of Approval dated 10/26/89 UP 89-529/Walter Flowers, page 2, number 13 states:

"No retail sales or wine tasting is permitted."

And again, June of 2002, file #UPE 01-0153, restates:

"no public tasting or special events".

A 1996 lawsuit settlement with Flowers Vineyard states:

"There will be no retail sales by appointment or otherwise, at the winery. For the purposes of this section, retail sales means sales across the counter. Real Parties may still take telephone and written orders and ship from the winery."

There are several other vineyards and wineries in this area. Many of them are several years old and are economically successful without on-site tasting rooms.

A use permit is a privilege, not a right. Mr. Schwartz knew the zoning limitations when he purchased his land.

We believe there are no mitigations sufficient to offset the negative impacts of the tasting room on our community and environment or sufficient to warrant ignoring the General Plan directives.

We offer the following arguments in support of our objections:

1. GENERAL PLAN: Approval of this tasting room would overthrow the General Plan, open the door to other tasting rooms in the area and more importantly establish a new, county-wide precedent allowing vineyards that do not process their grapes in on-site wineries to have tasting rooms.

2. COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT: The tasting room would bring commercial activities and traffic to Meyers Grade and Seaview Ridge, a predominantly residential, agricultural, ranching and visitor services area, of wild and scenic beauty. In the past 20 years there has been great pressure, from a number of sources, to commercialize this area. Many of the people opposing the Schwartz tasting room proposal are 30 to 40 year full-time residents, trying to preserve the quality of life we cherish.

The Sonoma County General Plan specifically recognizes the need to preserve areas which do not already have commercial facilities:

"Limit the scale of any new visitor and tourist oriented uses and confine them primarily to existing communities and existing locations. Assure that they are compatible with and protect the area's natural, undeveloped scenic character. Avoid these uses along roads between Highway 1 and Warm Springs Dam."

There is already existing commercial development on Highway One, a 15 minutes drive from Mr. Schwartz' vineyard. Wine is sold at Fort Ross Store, Timber Cove Inn's tasting room and Ocean Cove Store. Jenner, 10 miles south of the Schwartz vineyard, also has commercial venues suitable for selling wine - two restaurants, a cafe, gift shop and quick stop/gas station. Placing his product in these venues would keep visitors and traffic on a more suitable major roadway and benefit the local economy. Another option would be to encourage local vineyards and wineries to share a single tasting room, in an existing Highway One commercial area. One of the early local vineyards had a tasting room in Bodega Bay.

3. ROADS: The Schwartz vineyard is located on Seaview Ridge, the first ridge from the ocean, approximately 1,000 feet in elevation. All approaches to the ridge involve steep climbs. The county access roads to the Schwartz Vineyard (Meyers Grade, Seaview, Timber Cove and Fort Ross Roads) are not designed or maintained for heavy traffic or commercial ventures. All approaches to Seaview Ridge begin with an 18% grade and signs advising against RV's and trucks. The roads are very narrow and winding with few pull outs, often non-existent shoulders, numerous blind curves, high banks and steep drop offs. They are often shrouded in heavy fog in summer and winter.

Our elementary and high school buses use Meyers Grade/Seaview Road at the same time Mr. Schwartz' visitors would be heading home. Drivers, unfamiliar with the roads and compromised by alcohol use, are a danger to themselves, residents, emergency and volunteer fire services and other visitors.

These same roads are major evacuation routes in case of a disaster, such as an earthquake or large fire. (We live on the San Andreas Fault.)

Regular and emergency road maintenance and repair have been reduced due to County and State budget cuts. Having lived on these roads for many years, we have seen the larger impact of heavy truck traffic on county road surfaces. The road surface is broken in many areas. There are many more potholes. Drainage ditches are damaged from vehicles pulling off to avoid collisions and repairs do not last as long. These impacts have not been addressed in the MND.

4. EMERGENCY SERVICES: Timber Cove Fire Protection District (volunteer) is 40 square miles. Fort Ross Volunteer Fire Company response area is approximately 60 square miles. Cooperatively, these fire companies are covering 100 square miles. Visitors to Schwartz' Vineyard will be traveling Highway One, Meyers Grade, Seaview, Timber Cove and Fort Ross Roads within these fire districts. Additionally this area is served by one resident deputy sheriff, one out of area CHP officer and an ambulance based in Gualala. Only when weather conditions allow, the Sheriff's helicopter and Reach helicopter can respond when needed.

This response area contains 3 hotels, 3 parks, 5 campgrounds, a large retreat center and monastery and scattered residences.

Emergency response times are much longer than those in urban areas. First responders arrival on scene can take as much as 15 minutes and transportation to a hospital one to two hours. We have observed that fire and EMS volunteer personnel are spread thin during large fires and other overlapping emergency responses. This is particularly true during the dry summer months and winter storms.

The number of all emergencies increases dramatically with the influx of summer visitors. Since the summer is also our period of good weather, these are the months Mr. Schwartz is most likely to schedule special events and see an increase in the number of visitors. This creates even more pressure on our limited emergency services.

5. FIRE: Our homes and roads are in grasslands and heavily forested areas. Fire is a very real danger from spring to late fall. In recent years we have experienced drought conditions. Fire fighting water sources are widely scattered wells, springs and ponds, most on private land. Thus wildland firefighting involves bringing water to a fire by tanker truck. Much of our area is mountainous with very steep forested ravines and few access roads. Urban visitors, unaware of these conditions, present an additional hazard of accidental fire.

Fire and earthquakes are the most likely events to threaten a large number of local

residents and visitors. In a disaster, we will very likely be cut off from outside help or be delayed in receiving it. We polled our parks, motels, and related visitor services and estimated, that on a holiday weekend or low tide, 3,000 visitors will be in need of food, shelter and care, in addition to local residents.

6. CARBON FOOTPRINT: Visitor and Commercial Traffic - "The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors recently adopted the Sonoma County Climate Protection Campaign, which sets a target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 25% below 1990 levels by the year 2015."

* Approval of this tasting room is not in alignment with that target.

Schwartz Vineyard grapes are not processed on site. They are trucked at least 35 miles to be processed at a facility, in Santa Rosa. If a tasting room is approved, bottled wine will be trucked back to the vineyard to be sold. Customers will drive to the vineyard, often long distances, to taste/buy and drive home with their wine. This is at least two additional, unnecessary round trips, in order for Mr. Schwartz to sell wine at his vineyard. Mr. Schwartz has, for several years, sold his wines at off-site venues.

In addition, food, portable toilets and other supplies, for the proposed 18 special events, will be trucked to the site. Mr. Schwartz can not predict or control the number of daily visitors to his tasting room. He also has no way to effectively control their impacts while they are not on his site.

7. WATER: The Meyers Grade area is water-scarce and residents use many measures to conserve water. The well Mr. Schwartz drilled, to serve the tasting room, is only 800 feet from an adjoining property-owner's spring, which is the sole water source for three homes. The well, located in a new vineyard, may also be used to irrigate that vineyard; if so, this would increase the amount of water use stated in the MND. Also, use of the tasting room restrooms, by daily visitors, could compromise the limited water available to nearby residents.

Visiting the vineyard, at Mr. Schwartz invitation, we noticed plant and animal life in his pond. We are concerned that summer water use may reduce the size of the pond, having a negative impact on this ecosystem and the quality of the water.

8. NOISE: Sound travels a long distance in our area. At the top of Meyers Grade/Seaview Ridge we can hear motorcycles and diesel trucks down-shifting on Highway One. We can also hear waves breaking and sea lions barking. We hear vehicles approaching and leaving, for long distances, on our county roads. We hear cows bellow and coyotes yipping across the ridges. We treasure being able to hear ambient natural sounds without an overlay of man-made noise.

The presence of large numbers of people, cars arriving and departing, amplified or electric music, from 10 a.m. until almost sunset, on weekends and holidays, at Mr. Schwartz' special events, would compromise the very times we rest and enjoy the quiet of our surroundings.

IN CONCLUSION: We believe Mr. Schwartz' proposal for a Wine Tasting Room

1. Violates the Sonoma County General Plan.
2. Creates an inappropriate precedent, throughout the county, by allowing commercial development in a non-commercial area and vineyards without on-site wineries to have tasting rooms.

3. Puts alcohol compromised drivers and commercial vehicles, on roads completely unsuitable for increased traffic, at the risk of other drivers and their passengers. The increased traffic could potentially interfere with fire and emergency response.
4. Unduly burdens limited emergency services and puts us all at increased risk.
5. Increases the possibility of fire.
6. Creates unnecessary traffic shipping grapes out to a remote processing facility and shipping wine back to the vineyard, to sell to customers also traveling long distances.
7. Compromises the availability of sufficient water to neighbors.
8. Creates noise, which decreases the quality of life for residents and other visitors.

Respectfully submitted by,
Residents of Meyers Grade, Seaview, Timber Cove and Fort Ross Roads

* (Page 8/ UPE09-0027/ Environmental Checklist)