

Monterey County supes facing the ire of ag

Dennis Taylor, Salinas Californian, 4-24-15

Elected officials next week will decide whether to restrict several key ways in which future development in Monterey County is carried out, a move that has vintners along the Salinas Valley Wine Corridor fuming.

Called a General Plan, the document covers everything from new housing developments to agricultural land use for a periods stretching out 20 years or more. An updated General Plan was adopted in 2010 but was immediately slapped with four lawsuits. Two of the lawsuits were settled in 2013 and the two remaining – one each from The Open Monterey Project and LandWatch Monterey County – were settled in December of last year.

The action the Board of Supervisors will take Tuesday will be to approve or deny amendments to the 2010 General Plan that reflects December's settlement agreement. And it stands to be a boisterous meeting. The Planning Commission last month voted to recommend the board deny the amendments, arguing that the amendments "would undo policy compromises" made in the 2010 General Plan.

But planning commissioners also noted that the board must take into consideration such things as the litigation that would follow should supervisors deny the amendments. Planning Commission votes are recommendations; they do not set policy.

The proposed amendments would remove a streamlined permitting process for vineyards and wineries in the Salinas Valley Winery Corridor (mostly along River Road), prohibit development of vineyards on slopes over 25 percent in areas outside the corridor and limit the number of acres that can be developed within the corridor annually, and remove the possibility of building certain inns and other hospitality venues in the area.

Another amendment would require sustainable water supplies in the county, but that has been rendered moot by the state's Groundwater Sustainability Act, which is ordering counties to do just that.

Amy White, executive director of LandWatch Monterey County, declined to comment for this article. Molly Erickson, the attorney representing The Open Monterey Project, was not available to comment Thursday.

But opponents were more than willing to talk. Norm Groot, executive director of the Monterey County Farm Bureau, in a rallying cry to the agriculture community Thursday, said the intent of LandWatch is a simple "land grab."

"Monterey County agriculture must stand united against the land grab by no-growth entities," Groot said. "This is clearly an opportunity for these groups to limit future agricultural growth, and thus economic prosperity for the Salinas Valley."

Vintners expressed frustration because they say the time to have worked out disagreements was in the 10 years it took to adopt the most recent General Plan. Richard Smith, co-founder of Paraiso Vineyards near Soledad, said the amendments run counter to what the county said it wanted when it proposed the Winery Corridor in the 1990s. And he said that every element of the current plan was "nitpicked down to nickels and dimes."

"It was 10 very difficult years to get a General Plan established that represented all the compromising that could be mustered," Smith said. "It's [lawsuits] just sour grapes. I wasn't happy with the compromises but I was willing to live with them."

But if supervisors vote down the amendments, the future is all but certain.

"We'll be back in court," said Leslie Girard, assistant county counsel who spent the last eight months negotiating the settlement – and that was just the most recent incarnation of settlement talks. Talks began soon after the 2010 General Plan was adopted.