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## Winemaking in Moraga

*By Sophie Braccini*

Town staff has discussed the issue of how to regulate the few bonded commercial wineries in Moraga since 2012. Unlike 'hobby winemakers' who produce less than 160 cases of wine a year, or the residents who grow grapes in their backyards, the central question for these types of commercial operations is whether they are compatible with a residential neighborhood.

On March 23, Planning Director Ellen Clark brought a report to the Moraga Town Council and asked for direction to continue the discussion process. The council indicated that a dialogue should happen between the winemakers and their neighbors to define and address difficulties. Whether or not specific regulations will be needed remains to be decided.

The response at the meeting was mostly positive. But there was an undercurrent of tension between larger winemakers and their neighbors.

According to the staff report, there are 15 home-based vineyards in Moraga that convert grapes into wine. Most of them are non-commercial, producing less than 200 gallons of wine per year. The owners take their grapes to a professional facility to have them processed. Typical lot sizes of these hobby winemakers are between 15,000 square feet and 2.5 acres. These do not require state licensing and are not bonded. Council members thought that these operations did not need to be regulated beyond what is presently in the code.

There are three active home-based commercial wineries in Moraga: Bullfrog Creek Vineyard, Captain Vineyards and Parkmon Vineyards. A fourth winery located on Rheem Boulevard is no longer bonded. The largest winery produces 1,000 cases a year, the smallest 600. By comparison, smaller wineries in Napa County are defined as selling less than 10,000 cases a year, according to Rural Migration News. The U.S. has seven wineries that produce more than 10 million cases of wine a year.

Although Lamorinda winemakers are seeking to get an American Viticulture Area (AVA) certification, the ones present at the meeting said they do not intend to grow beyond their small scale.

These wineries are currently regulated under the Moraga municipal code that defines what a home-based business in a residential area can and cannot do. "Per Moraga municipal code there should be no exterior evidence, no alteration of the character of the neighborhood, and no creation of a parking or traffic problem," said Ben Noble, the consultant the town hired to work on this issue. He added that staff thinks that the current regulations are not appropriate for the larger wineries, and recommends working with the community to address their context.

Staff identified the following problems: the visibility of some of the equipment especially at the time of harvest; the increased traffic due to events on the properties; more deliveries and pick-up than is usual on a residential property; parking issues; and spraying of chemicals in the vineyards.

Bonded winemakers Sal and Susan Captain presented their model of winemaking and refuted staff's report issue by issue. They explained that they limit the number of events and do not invite more than 20 people at a time, none of their equipment is visible from the street, they run the only green-certified winery in Contra Costa County and have trained their vines to use very little water through dry-farming. They also said they never spray chemicals.

However, one of their neighbors, Gerald Bloomer, said that there are substantial challenges involved in running a business in a residential area, and he felt more regulations were needed.

Councilmember Dave Trotter cautioned his colleagues that more regulations could kill a budding industry that was adding to the character and the appeal of the town. He preferred focusing on increasing the dialogue between the winemakers and their neighbors. Vice mayor Mike Metcalf asked staff to get cues from the regulations in place in similarly small local winemaking regions, such as the Russian River area, because it was clear to him that neither staff nor the planning commission in charge of discussing future regulations had any experience in this area.

Mayor Roger Wykle expressed concern how the dialogue between parties would be organized. Clark said that formal meetings could be organized and that discussion would also occur during planning

commission meetings. The mayor said that before thinking about regulating, staff should focus on the defining the problems that need to be solved. At the time of the meeting, no data was available to document neighbors' discontent, and the council asked that a system be set in place to record complaints. "I don't see a lot of regulations required," added the mayor. Susan Captain called for a community-wide discussion. "My solution is to bring all parties together and resolve these issues in a spirit of cooperation, communication and good will," she said.

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