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St. Helena Star
Main St.
St. Helena, CA 94574
Dear Editor:

The headline on the front page of yesterday's Sunday Examiner/Chronicle said "In the Vineyards it is Raining Cash -- Napa and Sonoma counties awash in day-trippers". It goes on to say how visiting the winery of your dreams is in itself a cash crop. When wineries sell wine from their site, they get all the profit and therefore are highly motivated to encourage visitors. This is good business. But it has caused those who live within the city limits to face a new problem, more and more commercial wineries on small A-20 lots within the city limits, operated by the residents of the property.

In the last 5 months there have been at least 4 applications for a use permit to operate a commercial winery within the city limits in or near residential neighborhoods. Three applications will be moving through the approval process in the next few weeks and months. There are guidelines that the Planning Commission must follow in granting approval but the guidelines are problematic for the following reasons:

- The use permit will stay with the property forever, even if the next owner is not very caring with the neighbors.
- Tasting, events or visits by industry personnel and/or the public can be conducted by appointment and that appointment process is monitored and conducted by the winery owner. Restrictions on how many appointments and how often are virtually unenforceable.
- The size of the lot can be very small which means that many will be right next to residential homes.
- Wineries can have one employee but no restrictions on the number of harvest personnel and their cars.
- Retail sales and marketing activities are allowed by appointment or by set hours in the use permit. Again, this is difficult to monitor and enforce.
- Trucks and their traffic and size are limited but allowed. Again, difficult to monitor and enforce.
- The wineries can't use city water which means wells and that effect on the aquifer.
- In too many areas, the monitoring and enforcement of the restrictions fall upon the neighbors and will cause neighborhood friction.

I live on Scott St., which is two blocks long, and we are surrounded by 4 parcels of A-20 land on which it is now legal to have a commercial winery with all of the traffic and activity possible under the guidelines. All of the traffic generated by those potential wineries will use Scott St., which means Madrona and Hillview as well. I know that there are 131 similar parcels of A-20 land surrounding the residential neighborhoods in St. Helena. If you live on property that is near a smaller A-20 lot, it is time to voice your opinion on the granting of use permits for commercial wineries on those kinds of properties. Precedent-setting decisions are being made.

Apparently, it is common knowledge that restrictions on use permits are conveniently forgotten by subsequent owners and therefore the neighbors, who have planned to own their homes here for a long time, must then enter into a perpetual fight with the winery to maintain residential livability in their neighborhood. Save yourselves the trauma. Protest now. Watch the planning commission agenda, find out if the A-20 near you is a likely candidate, and get going on it.

Those who have residential wineries know that the public just knocks on their door to see if they are home and want to do business. Little signs that say "by appointment" do no good. Winery tour buses, the smaller ones with big windows, call the winery owners from the bus to see if they want to open for their group. Websites with your street on them, and all the thousands of links to those sites, will identify where the winery is and members of the public will "just drive by" to see where it is. Limos with important people in them will fail to understand why they can't come by when they want, appointment restrictions or no.

The winery/resident property will be worth more (commercial value) over time and your home will be worth less because of the commercial activity happening right there. Given the public winery activity that we all know in this town, if your house is in the line of fire, read last Sunday's paper, imagine the potential scene, and do something about it now. Write to the planning commission and attend the meetings.

Sandra Ericson