

Volker Eisele 1937-2015

Agricultural land advocate Volker Eisele dies



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Napa County has lost Volker Eisele, the man who helped put local agricultural protection in the hands of the voters.

“Volker was the lion of land use in Napa County,” said Sandy Elles, executive director of the Napa County Farm Bureau.

Eisele, 77, passed away Friday morning at his Volker Eisele Family Estate in Chiles Valley, Elles said. He was a native of Germany and a Napa County resident and grape grower for about four decades.

He is known for having spearheaded Measure J in 1990. Measure J and its successor, Measure P, require most changes away from agricultural land use designations to go to a vote of the people.

Over the years, Napa County voters have been asked to decide such proposals as expanded Lake Berryessa boat storage, outdoor dining at a rural restaurant, an Aetna Springs resort and the Stanly Lane Pumpkin Patch. There have been 15 Measure J votes, with seven passing and eight failing.

“Measure J won in the polls despite all the opposition,” Eisele said in 2012. “What the supervisors who were against us misjudged was that the people of Napa County, when you measured their opinions, were two-thirds in favor of good land use. The voters wanted protection.”

He called stripping county supervisors of these land-use decisions a “stop-gap solution” to find ways to protect agricultural land. Still, the measures keep supervisors from changing the landscape any given Tuesday, he said.

James Conaway in his 2002 Napa County book “The Far Side of Eden” devoted a chapter to Eisele and looked at his efforts to put Measure J on the ballot.

“Volker had been involved in every environmental issue affecting agriculture following establishment of the ag preserve in 1968, and there had been lots of those,” Conaway wrote.

Eisele’s land-use activism didn’t stop with Measures J and P. He has spoken out repeatedly at public meetings on growth issues. For example, he was involved in an unsuccessful 2012 ballot measure attempt to change land designation in Angwin from urban-residential to agricultural. That discussion continues.

“We want to protect land,” Eisele said during the Angwin campaign. “Protecting land has been popular in Napa County for 45 years.”

Elles, who met Eisele in 2001, calls him a friend and mentor.

“He so passionately believed that Napa is a special place and he dedicated his life to making sure that we were at the forefront of protecting our resources and sharing those strategies with others around the state and nation,” she said.

Eisele had no trouble making his views known, she said.

“He was very, very forceful, forthright,” Elles said. “You never had to guess where he was on an issue. Very outspoken. He didn’t have a shy bone in his body.”

State Assemblyman Bill Dodd crossed paths with Eisele during Dodd’s stint on the county Board of Supervisors from 2000 to the end of 2014. Dodd said Eisele spoke out whenever he thought something infringed on agriculture.

“Whether you agreed with everything he said or not, you would just have to totally respect what he was trying to accomplish, which was keep Napa Valley in grapes,” Dodd said.

Cio Perez is a vineyard manager and owner and past president of the Napa County Farm Bureau. He met Eisele in the mid-1970s while managing a ranch in lower Chiles Valley near Eisele’s property.

“For me and my relationship with Volker, anytime he felt you needed help of any kind, he was always there,” Perez said, adding help could range from advice to loaning a piece of farm equipment.

Eisele had a dry sense of humor and quick wit and seemed to enjoy life most of the time, Perez said. Hopefully, people will remember him for what he did to conserve agricultural lands in a manner that improved everyone’s life, whether they live in the cities or rural areas, he said.

“A lot of the things he did helped maintain the things people love about the Napa Valley and the entire county,” Perez said.

Eisele was born in Munster, Germany on Aug. 7, 1937 and in the early 1970s was a sociology graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. He and his wife Liesel came to the Napa Valley on weekends and they bought the family estate in 1974.

Their son Alexander grew up on the vineyard and is the ideal successor to his father, the Volker Eisele Family Estate website says. Their daughter Christiane works in emergency medicine, but assists her wine-making family when possible, it says.

Eisele was a member of the Napa County Farm Bureau and the Napa Valley Grapegrowers. The Farm Bureau in 2008 named Eisele its “outstanding agriculturalist of the year,” citing his career as a grape grower and his dedication to land use preservation and conservation.

Funeral plans had not been announced as of Friday afternoon.