

A new coalition, Vision 2050, will scrutinize county's future



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Thirteen people sat around a table at a house on a rural Dry Creek Road hillside talking about a Napa County future they intend to help shape.

They are on the steering committee for a new group in town, Vision 2050. What unites them as they fight their varying growth battles is the shared idea that development threatens rural Napa.

This coalition might attempt a 2016 land-use ballot measure if its doesn't see changes in Napa County policies to its liking.

Kathy Felch, a member of Stop Syar, opposes the proposed Syar quarry expansion near her neighborhood. She said citizens feel a "hapless hopelessness" when they don't think their voice matters.

"But that's changing," Felch said.

Ginna Beharry, a member of the Dry Creek Road Alliance, opened her Dry Creek Road home northeast of the city of Napa for this recent Vision 2050 meeting. She expressed concern about proposed large wineries on not-so-large parcels.

She pointed to the proposed Yountville Hill Winery on Highway 29 outside Yountville as a key example of what she said she thinks is going wrong.

Chris Malan has long fought local environmental battles and is on the Living Rivers Council. She talked about hillside vineyards and the effects these can have on watersheds and the streams flowing to the Napa River.

"If you get up in an airplane, you'll see a patchwork effect of what it's done to our forests," she said.

Different battles, common threads. Vision 2050 is a coalition of local groups that seek to merge their individual voices into a much louder voice.

From the Sierra Club to Protect Rural Napa to Get a Grip of Growth, they will try to flex some combined muscle. Vision 2050 wants to make certain that world-famous Napa County's glitz and glamour don't swamp its agriculture and open space.

David Hallett lives in Soda Canyon northeast of the city of Napa and is a member of Protect Rural Napa. He talked about an inverted pyramid, with Vision 2050 at the bottom supporting its individual member groups at the top.

David Heitzman lives in rural Circles Oaks between the city of Napa and Lake Berryessa. He is a member of Defenders of the East Napa Watersheds, a group fighting the proposed Walt Ranch hillside vineyard development in the hills between the city of Napa and Lake Berryessa.

Heitzman said Vision 2050 might hold a California Environmental Quality Act workshop. Citizens could learn the ins-and-outs of state-required environmental impact reports, a legal force so powerful that they can delay, and sometimes even stop, major, proposed projects.

"We've got to be armed with the knowledge and then we can make a difference," Heitzman said.

Chairing Vision 2050 is Dan Mufson, a member of the Watersheds Alliance for Atlas Peak. He became involved in local growth battles several months ago after learning about the Walt Ranch proposal.

Vision 2050 formed partly out of frustration, Mufson said. For example, he mentioned how the Planning Commission has allowed some new wineries to be built closer to roads than county rules allow.

"Lately, it just seemed for all the effort we were putting in, nothing is really happening," Mufson said. "We go to the meeting and talk about why we don't think there should be a variance and the next thing you know, there's a variance."

Basically, group members say they think things are getting out of control. Napa has too many wineries that are tourist centers, Mufson said.

As a political action committee, Vision 2050 might back its own candidates. If it can't change the mind of existing elected officials, it might try to change elected officials.

Vision 2050 held its first meeting more than a month ago and 50 people showed up, Mufson said. To keep the meetings manageable, the various groups chose representatives for the steering committee.

But Vision 2050 doesn't have the only vision for the valley. Wine industry officials talk about a changing economic landscape that has seen small wineries depend more on tourism and direct-to-consumer sales.

Even so, Rex Stults, a spokesman for Napa Valley Vintners, welcomed the formation of Vision 2050.

“We live in the United States of America,” he said. “It’s a free country ...everybody deserves to have a voice in the process.”

Working with other stakeholders is nothing new for Napa Valley Vintners, Stults said. The vintners worked with the Sierra Club, Friends of the Napa River and other groups on the Napa Green effort to establish environmentally sound wineries and vineyards.

“Once you get everybody in the room to sit down, you try to figure out what our vision is for Napa Valley. I think you’ll find it’s not going to be really disparate,” Stults said.

Napa Valley Vintners invited Vision 2050 to its recent meeting on potential Indian casinos in the valley. Both groups would likely oppose this type of development.

County Supervisor Brad Wagenknecht said Vision 2050 has his attention.

It appears to him various neighborhood organizations attending county meetings found they had similar issues. They seem to have come together organically, he said.

Wagenknecht expects Vision 2050 will be taking part in the county’s upcoming Agricultural Protection Advisory Committee effort to look at county growth policies.

“It will be good to have them be part of APAC,” he said.

After only a few weeks of existence, Vision 2050 seems to have found a niche and role.

“We’re going to be the watchdog and say, ‘Is this a proper application? Is it being scrutinized like it should be?’ ” Beharry said.