

County may limit special events on major roads



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Napa County Supervisors are trying to figure out the rules of the road for special events such as marathons and cycling tours that draw hundreds -- sometimes thousands -- of participants.

It's a thorny issue, as Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting demonstrated. Still, the board is leaning toward enacting such rules as limiting special events on Silverado Trail, Highway 29 and other major roads and limiting road closures.

Supervisors resumed a discussion they began on March 15. Since then, a board subcommittee of Diane Dillon and Alfredo Pedroza has worked with interested parties to arrive at proposals for the unincorporated county.

"This is not an overnight thing," Dillon said.

Speakers and letter-writers mentioned the benefits from these special events -- money raised for charities, people getting exercise, money going to local businesses, care taken to comply with county rules.

But others talked about roads being too clogged for motorists, wineries having to close tasting rooms, event participants defecating in people's front yards for lack of portable toilets, farm equipment being hindered. They talked about the shadowy side of Napa's popularity.

"That's the underlying reason for us trying to put some better parameters on this and shape it and I think it's important for people to know all of that," Dillon said.

Napa doesn't want to stop special events, Pedroza said. Rather, it wants to live within its means and avoid the problems that some people have been seeing.

This year, the county had 25 special events on its roads, including 13 on Silverado Trail with four closures and 10 on Highway 29 with no closures. Events ranged from the Napa Valley Marathon to Ragnar Relay Napa Valley to the Davis Double Century bicycle event.

Napa County Bicycle Coalition Executive Director Patrick Band wants the county to collect more data to help it understand the impacts of the proposed changes and both the impacts and benefits of the special events.

"Without this kind of detailed information, we're concerned the board is going to make decisions it's going to regret down the road," he said.

He disagreed with a proposed limit of one event per weekend and two per month for major roads. Two events with 500 people each might have less impact than one event with 2,500 people, he said.

Meanwhile, event organizers are already preparing for the anticipated new rules.

Cate Taylor is director of the Ride to Defeat ALS. She said the idea to limit events to one per weekend on major roads means her event must change its date, given it has long shared the last Saturday in September and a portion of Silverado Trail with the Knoxville Double Century.

“Our participants have known our event to be on the same day for more than a decade,” Taylor said. “Many have already marked their calendar and booked hotel rooms here in Napa ... I can’t predict how that will effect registration and fundraising, but it’s already been confusing and frustrating.”

Jake Scheideman of St. Helena Cyclery said he earns his living from the enthusiasm of bikers, hikers and runners. But he’s concerned about safety. He’s worried that Napa Valley is being tarnished by too many people trying to do too many things at the same place at the same time.

Some of the special road events have big impacts, others don’t, he said.

“It’s really not about cyclists and runners, it’s about managing the scale of what’s appropriate in the valley,” he said.

Napa County Farm Bureau officials expressed

concern about having large groups of bikers and runners on roads during cultivation season from March through May and harvest season from August through October. That's when tractors, spray rigs, trucks, tanker trucks and other heavy equipment are on the move.

"It's critical we are able to move product and equipment over the roadways efficiently and safely," Farm Bureau President Norma Tofanelli said. "This is a huge issue."

Peter Nissen of the bureau said Saturday is a particularly important day in spring and during harvest time for farmers. The Napa Valley Marathon is held in March, but on a Sunday. People are moving all of the time during the marathon, so there's no blockage at intersections for long periods.

"I think that's something to be used as a model to work other events in the future," he said.

Supervisor Keith Caldwell said the county should design a method so the public can complain about special events that cause problems. Complaints could lead to a hearing with public works officials, which in turn could keep problem-causing events from receiving future permits.

"As in all cases, there are those who follow the rules and do a good job and those who are bad actors," Caldwell said.

The Board of Supervisors approved having staff put a number of special event proposals in the form of an

ordinance for a future meeting. It also asked for alternatives to the proposal to limit events to one per weekend on major roadways. Caldwell, Dillon and Pedroza votes “yes.”

Supervisors Mark Luce and Brad Wagenknecht abstained. Luce said he supported the effort, but had concerns about the details. Wagenknecht missed most of the lunch-time discussion because of a prior commitment.

“This is the first, but not the last, opportunity for public comment,” Dillon said.

Proposed road event rules

Here is a sampling of proposed special road event rules:

- Limit special events on major roadways such as Silverado Trail, Wooden Valley Road, Highway 29, Devlin Road and American Canyon Road to two per month and one per weekend.
- Permit full closure of major roads only for events with at least 1,000 participants. Smaller events could avoid major roads or revise their plans not to require a closure.
- Improve public notice of upcoming events, possibly through having message boards along roads, increasing use of Nixle and posting more information on the county website.
- Prohibit relay-type events.
- Have a complaint system for the public.