

Pity the poor supervisor

February 16, 2016 • [PAUL MOSER](#), Napa

With Napa County's election season upon us, it's a good moment to highlight the plight of our beleaguered, beloved County Supes. Theirs is a tough job, with punji stakes to the right of them, snake pits to the left. Doing what is best for Napa County might sound easy, but the reality includes lots of mano-a-mano with politically explosive devices.

For instance, there is the perennial issue of winery and vineyard development. How much to do? How quickly? What about impact on the valley as a whole, including the crowds, traffic, erosion, water use, the possibility of Napa County becoming a kind of theme park — you know, where binge tourism is king? And what about local people? Well, they just have to do their best to stay out of the way -- of progress! While of course allowing plenty of time for navigating nightmarish traffic, wherever they're going.

Right in our laps now, we have one of the most interesting iterations of this issue, one that every Napa County resident should be aware of. Caution: It is, as they say, a very hot and contentious potato.

It involves the framework of the Ag Preserve. On one side of the contest, there are those who want to maintain the system as it is, insisting that laws are important, that all wineries should adhere to the structural footprint and production limits described in their permits. On the other, there are those who would just as soon turn a blind eye, adopting a more lax approach to enforcing existing permit limits. They oppose any insistence, for example, that wineries produce no more wine than the maximum allowed by their permits. And they are putting a notably unappetizing

Orwellian spin on the Ag Preserve charter by wanting the “agricultural activity” (that has always defined what wineries can do at their wineries) to now include things like “marketing” and “winery events,” such as weddings and concerts.

If these activities don’t seem too terribly agricultural to you, you are not alone.

But what can the supervisors do?

The forces that want to fudge the existing rules, rules that have staunchly protected the beauty and sustainability of the valley’s grape-growing industry, are generally the wealthiest, most powerful entities in the county. Which is to say, they’re the biggest campaign donors, the movers and shakers who can assure a candidate of a smooth ride through the election cycle. Or, if opposed, can be a relentless foe who will virtually guarantee that any uncooperative election bid will sink like a stone.

Up against this juggernaut, what do the supervisors see? Usually a small, dedicated group of citizens, some of whom are environmentalists, some whose homes and immediate surroundings have been threatened or affected by unpermitted expansion, most of whom have understood the effects of uncontrolled tourism. These might ask if you have seen, say, Honolulu recently, and exactly when the phrase “tropical paradise” became ironic there. How soon before Maui hits that “critical mess”?

Whatever the supervisors think of their argument, a crucial underlying question can’t help but be: How many votes can these people deliver? How much campaign cash? An extremely significant calculus for our public servants is this: If I am sticking my neck out to maintain the Ag Preserve — which admittedly has served us extremely well since the 1970s — am I going to be

recognized for doing that? Or am I going to disappear in the very next election cycle, bested by a more pliable candidate, one who is a bit less resistant to forgetting about winery permit limits?

It's an old problem, one that exists in other contexts on the state and federal levels as well. Will the general public, who don't speak in a single voice, who are rarely galvanized by a single issue, who are busy earning a living and keeping their heads down — will they coalesce to resist the powerful forces of developers, large corporations, or other groups of wealthy and connected investors?

Not bloody likely. And so the supervisors might reasonably conclude that it's best to keep their heads down, too. Go with the flow. The flow of cash, the flow of influence. What possible good can come from championing a lost cause, even if it is manifestly the best decision for a valley that is already being compared to Disneyland? Besides, vote with the Power and you might get invited to splashy parties at trendy, exclusive venues. Billionaires will call you by your first name. What's not to like?

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