

Top 10 stories: How much wine should there be in wine country?



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Napa County's wine country sometimes seemed at a crossroads in 2014, as people disagreed whether certain proposals for new wineries and vineyards should go forward.

The questions asked weren't new. Napa County for years has tried to find a balance between agriculture and tourism and between agriculture and the natural environment.

Projects such as the proposed Yountville Hill Winery prompted the questions to be asked again. This winery is envisioned for 10.9 acres on the hill that rises out of the middle of the Napa Valley east of Highway 29 and north of Yountville.

For critics, the proposed winery was just too much – too much traffic, too much noise, too much cutting into the hillside, too much hospitality and tourism plans. For proponents, it was in keeping with the spirit and rules of Napa's wine country.

Those types of comments were heard over and over again at Planning Commission meetings and Board of Supervisors meetings looking at a variety of proposals.

The Planning Commission on July 2 approved Yountville Hill Winery by a 3-1 vote. The Board of Supervisors on Dec. 16 rescinded the approval without ruling on the project's merits, with the developers agreeing that an environmental impact report should be done.

That means the proposed Yountville Hill Winery could be back in 2015, though perhaps in a revised form.

“Without having the full record, I can personally say I think this development as proposed was too intense for that hillside and the variances they were requesting were very questionable in my mind,” Supervisors Mark Luce said at the Dec. 16 meeting.

Woolls Ranch Winery in the Mount Veeder area also proved controversial. Opponents said it could cause water and traffic problems. In this case, both the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors approved the project.

“We’ve complied with the rules,” Paul Woolls told supervisors.

The Walt Ranch project has no winery component, but is a proposed vineyard of about 300 acres in the hills between the Napa Valley and Lake Berryessa. Critics complained of possible effects on the watershed and the planned removal of 28,000 trees.

Local environmentalist Chris Malan on Nov. 22 told supervisors that Napa needs to decide if it wants to continue to allow hillsides to be stripped.

“There is a groundswell – also known as a grassroots effort – in Napa County where many people are very upset with the expansion of the wine industry into the wildlands of our watersheds, causing significant harm,” she said.

County Supervisor Diane Dillon on Nov. 22 talked about the balance that the county is trying to strike. For every person who wants the county to tighten its winery rules, there’s a person who wants the county to loosen them, she said.

“We need to have the bigger discussion and look at the bigger picture,” Dillon said. “In that big picture, what really concerns me is we’ve got to protect agricultural land. That’s the question, how do we do it? If it’s not profitable, folks, we won’t be able to protect it. That’s the bottom line. It’s more profitable to sell all this land for houses.”

The Board of Supervisors will have to be careful, she said.

“If we stop allowing agriculture as an active, flourishing, sustainable use of the land, we’re sunk,” Dillon said.

All of these types of 2014 questions should also be prominent in 2015, as the county grapples with individual proposals and what Dillon calls the “bigger picture.”