

# Local Winery Operation Threatened by Permit Overhaul

## Increased Restrictions Could Set Precedent Affecting Numerous Area Wineries

✓ Wineries  
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by Michael Thomas

**T**he decade-old battle between a Santa Cruz County winery and neighbors complaining of noise and traffic impacts finally went to a hearing before the County's Planning Commission in late July.

The Commission asked for an overhaul of the winery's use permit, which it determined to be vague and outdated. How the conflict plays out in the next two months will set a precedent for a slew of other wineries in the area. Many of them operate with similar use permits drawn up on old, yellowing paper -- use permits which are arguably outdated.

### Hallcrest Not Alone

There are 20 or so wineries in the County. Scattered among residential neighborhoods, they exist as enclaves of small scale farming in a State where industrial agriculture is king.

In Santa Cruz County, most crops are cultivated on expanses of flat, low-lying land, most of it clearly defined in agricultural zones around Watsonville. But small wineries are a rare bird. Of those that have their own vines, many are planted on land cleared by turn of the century logging. Those plots are in mountain areas that are home to residents who choose the peace and clean air of the mountains over the hubbub of the city, so it's no surprise that noise becomes a touchy subject.

According to John Hibble, Executive Director of the Santa Cruz Mountain Winegrowers Association, many of the area's



wineries face similar problems. The Silver Mountain Vineyards was forced to cancel all their special events in response to neighbors complaints and isn't able to host wine tastings. Hibble said that the Planning Department's handling of the Hallcrest case demonstrates a trend towards increased controls on an industry already burdened with State regulations.

"That's happened to every winery that's been in the business for more than 10 or 15 years," he said. "The kinds of restrictions that they are trying to put on wineries are going to cause some of those businesses to fail."

### Can Small Wineries Process Purchased Grapes?

Neighbors of the Hallcrest Winery in Felton have also questioned whether the Use Permit should allow the business to process grapes purchased from other vineyards. The Use Permit is for an agricultural operation, they contend, and processing offsite grapes brings noisy trucks to the property.

In Santa Cruz County, that

practice is not unusual, particularly when a vineyard has been hit with disease. The McHenry Winery, which was established by UCSC's first Chancellor, is just starting to recover from an attack of the Sharpshooter-borne Pierce's disease, which destroyed their vines years ago. Hibble said that, without offsite grapes to support them during replanting, the business would have been wiped off the wine-tour map.

If Hallcrest's use permit emerges from an overhaul with limitations on the use of offsite grapes, that decision could ultimately threaten a slew of County wineries.

Winery owner John Schumacher said that such changes could threaten the viability of his business.

"I'm going to talk to these two neighbors and see if there is anything we can do to mitigate this situation," Schumacher said.

He's already working on rearranging some equipment on the property to dampen noise. He plans to relocate a refrigeration unit further back into a coppice of trees, an operation that will require a crane and some costly county permits. □