

Shocking idea from Grapegrowers

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The gap between grape growers and vintners over regulating Napa County's wine industry became a chasm Wednesday.

After spending nearly two years trying to hammer out a definition of a winery, county grapegrowers changed directions and said the whole issue could be resolved if the county would require all wine produced in Napa County to contain 75 percent Napa County grapes.

"Our proposal would do more to preserve agriculture than all the other words," grapegrower Andy Beckstoffer said after the meeting.

Napa County will only remain agricultural as long as the growers have a market for their grapes, he said. The proposal caught commissioners and vintners by surprise.

The commission isn't scheduled to discuss the new proposal again until Dec. 16.

If the commission accepts the grapegrowers proposal, it could end months of debate over the legal meaning of words and the structure of sentences defining what business activities are permitted at wineries.

Beckstoffer, a former county planning commissioner, suggested the county should use the same standard as the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms uses when it defines Napa County wine: 75 percent of the grapes must be grown in the county.

Visibly upset at the grapegrowers proposal, Reverdy Johnson of Johnson Turnbull Vineyards called it elitist and unworkable.

For nearly two years, vintners, grapegrowers and commissioners have been wrangling over language to define what kinds of activities should be permitted at a winery besides wine production.

Beckstoffer likened the grapegrowers' idea to the controversial agricultural preserve zoning, a county law adopted in 1968 that prohibited agricultural parcels less than 40 acres.

"Hopefully we won't have that controversy. But it was worth it in 1968 and it's worth it now," he said.

Some of the issues that have been discussed include whether wineries should be allowed to have kitchens, sell art and what kinds of public events they can hold.

Growers and vintners are dependent on each other, but over the months that the commission has been dealing with the definition, they have proposed different ways to ensure their survival.

The continuing success of grapegrowing is jeopardized by allowing such commercial activities as food service and art sales in agricultural areas, representatives of the Napa County Farm Bureau and the Napa Valley Grape Growers Association have said.

Conversely, the vintners argue that being able to offer food to their customers on occasion and sell art is equally important to their success.

After the grapegrowers dropped their bomb, or exposed their "hidden agenda" as Johnson called it, representatives from Louis Martini, Inglenook, Robert Mondavi and others told the commission that the limitation would hurt their operations.

Many said they buy grapes from other counties and wouldn't always be able to meet the 75 percent requirement.