

Yolo County struggles to balance farm tourism with farming

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Call it a battle of crop dusters vs. crudités.

A new business sector has sprung up in rural Yolo County – event centers and bed-and-breakfasts for tourists drawn to the county’s farm-to-fork ethos. These facilities are causing consternation among some of the county’s old-line farmers, who point out that most farming in Yolo is still done on an industrial scale.

The wedding venue owners, including two couples from San Francisco, say they’re showcasing the county’s agricultural heritage while earning a living. Farmers worry the hospitality businesses – with their fine-dining, luxury lodgings and party barns – could undermine agriculture that relies on loud, dusty machinery such as combines and tomato harvesters.

“Bed-and-breakfasts don’t mix with crop dusters,” Ralph Holsclaw, owner of Growers Air Service in Woodland, told the Yolo County supervisors last week. “Somebody will say they smell a chemical. Somebody will say we woke ’em up on Sunday morning. It will be an untenable position.”

There are about a dozen of the so-called event centers scattered across the southern half of Yolo County, some at wineries, others at historic farmsteads.

Once unheard of in the county’s table-flat farmland, the businesses are drawing entrepreneurs and patrons from the urbanized Bay Area. Both groups are eager for a taste of rural life that often comes at a lower price than they would pay in the neighboring Napa and Sonoma valleys.

Even though Yolo County has won acclaim recently for its organic farms and wineries, the basis of its economy is more prosaic. Vast tracts are planted in alfalfa to feed cattle and tomatoes to make ketchup and spaghetti sauce. A handful of longtime farming families continue to control much of the rural landscape.

Some of those families and their allies argue that the type of hospitality businesses that might work in the wine-growing regions of Napa and Sonoma aren’t a good fit for Yolo. They have asked the Yolo County supervisors to revisit the county’s rules regarding agritourism to limit new wedding venues and B&Bs that don’t have a clear link to an existing farm.

The wedding business owners say the influx of visitors to rural areas promotes the county’s agriculture while bolstering and diversifying the local economy. No farming operations have been harmed by the relatively small number of wedding venues in the county’s large unincorporated area, they said.

“There is not a problem,” Rafael Galiano, co-owner of wedding venue the Inn at Park Winters, told the supervisors Tuesday. “There hasn’t been a problem in five years. There hasn’t been enough (of) anything to bring to a public platform. We have all respected each other tremendously.”

Galiano and his partner, John Martin, bought the Park Winters property, with its 1865 Victorian mansion, in 2011 for close to \$2 million. They moved from San Francisco and turned it into a successful and highly regarded event center that now features a fine-dining restaurant open to the public.

Their friends Philip Watt and Dahvie James took a similar route when they sold their home in the hills above Oakland and bought 80 acres along County Road 29. The couple submitted a proposal, now pending, to the county for a wedding-and-event center called Field and Pond that would use the existing buildings without new construction.

The property, once called the Scott ranch after a pioneer farming family, has a 1910 craftsman bungalow, an old barn and several outbuildings. It lies north of Winters, which in the past two decades has gone from a sleepy farm town to an increasingly popular tourist destination because of its restaurants and wineries.

James said he thinks an unreasonable fear of change near Winters is driving the controversy in Yolo.

“In our minds, we think we’re doing something that’s going to be quite rich in enhancing and building on the heritage of the Winters area,” James said.

Still, Watt and James’ proposed project doesn’t sit well with neighbors on County Road 29, including Bruce Rominger, the scion of one of the county’s oldest, most prominent farming families.

Rominger said he farms the fields around the nearby Inn at Park Winters with some difficulty, though he is on good terms with the owners.

“There are challenges when weddings are going on on weekends and you don’t want to put noise next to it” by harvesting or crop dusting, he said.

He said he believes the proliferation of event centers represents a threat to Yolo County’s large-scale agriculture.

“If you multiply Park Winters around the county ... you end up not being able to farm there,” he said.

Rominger and other critics said they don’t want Yolo to experience the problems that counties such as San Luis Obispo, Napa and Sonoma had when tourism started to overshadow and interfere with farming.

“It becomes agricultural Disneyland,” Rominger said. “You don’t have ag production left.”

Rominger recently asked the Board of Supervisors to impose a 45-day moratorium on new event centers so that the county’s code could be updated to make sure that only farmers can open agritourism businesses.

After nearly three hours of public testimony and debate, the supervisors rejected the moratorium at their meeting Tuesday but agreed to hold a public workshop to examine the issue soon.

“We need to involve the folks here and others who feel strongly on both sides,” said Jim Provenza, chairman of the Board of Supervisors.

Cash-strapped Yolo County has been trying to encourage agritourism for years as a way to bring in tourist dollars and diversify its economy. (One of the few significant sources of sales-tax revenue in the unincorporated county, for instance, is a truck stop on Interstate 5. Most other businesses are in the cities of Davis, Woodland, Winters and West Sacramento and pay taxes locally.)

The idea of having tourists visit farms and wineries, and spend their money at rural businesses such as farm stands and restaurants, is part of the county's long-term growth plan. But a zoning ordinance that regulates agritourism has proven confusing and is at the heart of the current debate.

It starts off by defining agritourism as an "income-generating activity conducted on a working farm or ranch, or other agricultural operation or agricultural facility, for the enjoyment and education of visitors, guests, or clients." But it ends by listing "event centers that accommodate weddings, music, and limited dining" as among the permissible uses.

Rominger told the supervisors they need to ensure the first part of the ordinance is followed by county planners, who must approve each project.

"I'm for keeping the ag in agritourism," he told the supervisors Tuesday. "Let's make sure these are working farms and ranches."

In an interview, Rominger said he supports the kind of business venture proposed by the Heringer family, longtime farmers near Clarksburg who used to grow sugar beets but now make wine. Like Field and Pond, the Heringers also have an application pending before the county to open a bed-and-breakfast event center.

"They are real grape growers," Rominger said. "They're farmers."

His neighbors, though well-intentioned business people, aren't farmers, at least not yet, he said.

James took issue with that characterization. He said he and his husband – Phil Watt, a veterinarian in San Francisco – are both from rural backgrounds and plan to plant their long-fallowed property in fruit orchards and vegetable and flower gardens.

"It's farm to fork, and it's flower to table," James said of their business proposal.

A Sacramento-area native and UC Davis graduate, James said he and Watt currently split their time between Winters and an apartment in San Francisco but plan to make the Winters property their home and spend "the rest of our lives living out a dream for us."

"We see ourselves as a ranching bed-and-breakfast," James said. "We'll ultimately contribute to agricultural production in Yolo County."

Rominger said that's fine. But let people become farmers first, then open businesses that promote their agricultural enterprises.

“It can’t be a big garden just for show. That’s not production agriculture,” he said. “I’m all for Dahvie doing that (establishing a farm) and coming back to the county in two or three years” with his business plan.