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EXTERNAL

Why Short-Term Vacation Rental Has Gone Wrong for Sonoma Valley

If you happen to live in Sonoma Valley close to the town of Sonoma but still in the county (and there are many small neighborhoods like this), you are noticing an unbelievable surge in short term vacation rentals. Most of us had to endure clandestine weddings and short-term vacation rental usage by those wanting to escape San Francisco and New York during

Covid even when shelter in place was mandated for our county.

And yet the only monitoring that can happen is by us, the neighbors, who are turned into complainers and whiners and that makes you very unpopular and creates tension between households.

What's different now is that the short-term vacation rental owners are mostly out-of-towners and they are investing in multiple properties. We own a home that can easily be turned into a multi bedroom rental and have been approached by both Pacaso (time share concept that bypasses vacation rental rules even though the "fractional owners" can only stay 2 weeks at a time) and out-of-town investors who can't wait to turn our single-family household dwelling into a short-term vacation rental.

My wife and I resist because we love our community and our neighborhood and already 30% of the homes in our small 16 home cul de sac are already short term vacation rentals. We have noticed how it's changed the nature of our neighborhood. We fear that we will soon be a street of nothing but short-term vacation rentals as we are so very close to the town.

We now have a cavalcade of cars and visitors who are unknown to us travelling down our street at all hours and with little care that they are in a residential neighborhood. We have to complain to a remote entity to get noise abated or parties turned down a notch and often times that does nothing. We all have wells and are doing our best to conserve water by washing less and yet I wonder how the turn for each of these larger homes (yes, we have 2 that boast 12 overnight guests) uses up the valuable ground water unnecessarily for people who don't live in our community.

Is the TOT (transient occupancy tax) so valuable that it can't be made up by the hotels that also pay TOT (there are 2 just half mile away that always seem to have availability). And if these are businesses and clearly the owners increasingly, like our neighbor how just bought their 2nd vacation rental house, live full time in their home in Silicon Valley, then they should at least be forced to have business licenses and face real consequences when they break the rules. We were currently told that PRMD has never pulled a short-term vacation permit.

Given our need to keep all neighbors vigilant on fire safety and possible evacuation, I shudder

to think what will happen when a large party house doesn't follow the directions for the community on fire alert. I found myself recently explaining to the new San Mateo-based homeowner of a 5 bedroom short term vacation rental next door as to why using the fire pit during a mega drought wasn't recommended.

Who represents us? We long to be in the town of Sonoma (we are one block away) which values neighborhoods by keeping out these vacation rentals. Instead, we are under the aegis of a county that has no idea how destructive it is to our neighborhoods when they permit, with abandon, these "small hotels." If these short-term vacation investors want to be in the hotel business, then invest in one of the many that we have in our community that could use some investment money. And no, we're not begrudging the room rentals that some do to defray the cost of their home as hosted rentals which were initially the spirit of AirBnB, where you can experience a community through the eyes of a local.

We don't think that Sonoma County PRMD should be in the business of granting permission to anyone who wants to set up a hotel business in a neighborhood. And asking us to pay and beg for exclusion zones seems like an inappropriate pay-for-play model. Some in exclusion zones have reported that when the next street behind isn't excluded, then the short-term rental homes are literally in your backyard and are multiplying like rabbits. Do we want to become Palm Springs? If you live outside the Sonoma (even a block over) you have come to expect that your neighbor will now be vacation rentals who don't even live in the community.

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