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By CHRIS COUNTS

Proponents fume over delay in short-term rental ordinance

AS MONTEREY County officials begin their third year of work on an ordinance that might allow short-term rentals in the unincorporated areas, homeowners who rent their properties are upset that they're receiving warnings or citations, and they want the process sped up.

Proponents of short-term rentals made their comments during a Monterey County Planning Committee meeting March 30 in Salinas. They spoke after county planning official Melanie Beretti said the process of developing the ordinance will take another year.

Because county planning resources have been focused on other pressing issues — such as the Carmel River Lagoon flood control project and a medical marijuana ordinance — the creation of the short-term rental ordinance has been on the back burner. “We’re looking at summer before we’ll be able to refocus on short-term rentals,” she said.

But the delay — coupled with the county’s practice of sending letters warning people not to rent their homes or be cited — did not sit well with some in the audience.

Annee Martin, the owner of Sanctuary Vacation Rentals and a member of the Monterey County Vacation Rental Alliance, was the first of several speakers at the meeting who said many local business owners are being treated unfairly.

Martin complained to planning commissioners that businesses like hers are being “targeted and shut down,” and blamed the scrutiny on a “vigilante group” that has turned people in.

“People’s lives are being affected,” she said. “We really need an ordinance.”

Also a member of the vacation rentals group, Chuck Stein took aim at the time it’s taken to arrive at this point.

“I’d like to ask the commission to raise the priority of the short-term rental ordinance,” Stein suggested. “Dave Potter’s office has said they support vacation rentals and they see their economic benefit, but nothing has been done.

” Susan Bradley, the president of the vacation rentals group, urged county officials to back off from citing people until an ordinance is finalized. She noted other counties suspended enforcement while they developed ordinances — and she said officials from those counties have reported few problems.

“It makes no sense to shut down people,” said Bradley, who floated the possibility of turning the issue into a ballot initiative.

Nobody against

Nobody at the hearing spoke out against short-term rentals. Previously, opponents have said the practice makes it harder for long-term residents to find housing, violates zoning codes, creates more noise and less privacy in neighborhoods not accustomed to tourist traffic, strains infrastructure and diminishes “a sense of community.”

Responding to complaints about enforcement, Beretti told the audience that code enforcement staff responds “when they receive complaints,” and “no citations will be issued unless those complaints are found to have merit.”

Planning Commissioner Martha Diehl said there is little she and her colleagues can do to accelerate the process. “Priorities are set by the board of supervisors,” Diehl explained. “We don’t decide what we’re going to hear.”

Another planning commissioner, Don Rochester, agreed the pace of the process needs to pick up. “Three years?” he asked. “Come on guys, let’s get this to the board.”