

The Carmel Pine Cone – November 25, 2016

## **Farr bashes STRs, calls for penalty on empty homes**

By CHRIS COUNTS

HE'LL BE stepping down from Congress Jan. 3, but Sam Farr just stepped into the middle of the short-term rental debate when he left no doubt where he stands on the thorny issue.

"I don't think we should have short-term rentals in any community in this county," declared the soon-to-be-retired Farr, who will be replaced in Washington D.C. by Congressman-Elect Jimmy Panetta. Farr made his comments at a workshop Nov. 9 in Salinas.

In particular, the congressman objected to vacation stays in Big Sur, where land use is guided by a local plan that he helped craft in the late 1970s and early 1980s — and which the California Coastal Commission certified in 1986. The plan didn't anticipate the growth of the short-term-rental industry — which has exploded in recent years because of websites like AirBnB — but it does limit visitor-serving accommodations to specific areas along Highway 1.

The plan also states that residential areas "are not well suited for commercial agriculture, commercial, or visitor uses; and use of these areas ... should continue to be for residential purposes."

"I can tell you the intent of the [Big Sur Land Use Plan] was never to allow short-term rentals," Farr insisted.

Instead of vacation stays, Farr would like to see more affordable options for visitors in Big Sur.

"I think we need to allow more overnight accommodations for low-income [visitors] through camping sites and RV sites, but certainly not to allow private homes to be used for short-term rentals," he told the Monterey County Planning Commission.

Farr would like to see more done to create opportunities for workforce housing in Big Sur. Many employees travel great distances to work in Big Sur, and some even sleep in their cars.

The congressman also took aim at people who own empty homes, wishing he had the ability to charge them for the luxury.

"They should pay an extra penalty," he said. "They're not contributing to our community."

Farr urged planning commissioners to keep short-term rentals out of Big Sur. "You, as the cops of Big Sur, should make sure short-term rentals are never allowed in that region."

### **Some praise, others criticize**

The congressman was just one of more than 40 residents who commented on short-term rentals at the workshop. The views expressed spanned the spectrum between allowing the practice and banning it.

Many of the speakers live in Big Sur, where opposition to vacation stays is strongest, but certainly not unanimous.

"Opponents say Big Sur and Carmel Highlands are so pristine that STRs should not be allowed," said Lori Kempf, who rents out a home down the coast for short visits. "It is precisely because these areas are so beautiful that the Coastal Act prioritizes visitor lodging so people can also enjoy these areas."

Big Sur resident Betty Withrow also defended the practice and noted that it's been around longer than most people realize. "Every pioneering family on coast welcomed travelers into their homes," Withrow said.

But others disagreed. Resident Jerrie Masten Hanson said short-term visitors routinely pass through her land. "Our homes should be our sanctuaries and not a drive-through," she stated.

Big Sur resident Steve Beck suggested "community preservation" be considered important when the ordinance is drafted. "Right now, the Big Sur community is being gutted," he said.

The owner of the Big Sur River Inn, Alan Perlmutter told commissioners that his resort is being held to tougher standards than what short-term rental operators are asking for. "We recently spent three years getting our permits to add two lodging units, and we paid \$10,000 in permitting fees," Perlmutter said.

Residents from Carmel Highlands, Carmel Valley and other unincorporated parts of the county also traded views on the topic. Two speakers testified — through a translator — that the vacation-stay industry employs them and other family members. "The decision you make will affect my family," a woman named Veronica said.

Speaking for the Monterey County Vacation Rental Alliance, attorney Gary Patton said proponents of short-term rentals have waited long enough for an ordinance regulating their business, and he pleaded with planning commissioners to set a hard deadline for creating it. He said the issue has raised tempers and split neighborhoods.

"We don't want an infinite delay," said Patton, who once served as executive director for the slow-growth nonprofit, LandWatch Monterey County. "People are threatening each other with physical violence out there. We need a clear ordinance and clear rules that make it easy to get that license and make it really easy to revoke it if people break the rules."

Planning commissioner Keith Vandevere, whose district includes Big Sur, Carmel Highlands and Carmel Valley, said he is concerned about how short-term rentals impact affordable housing.

"It is absolutely clear that STRs are resulting in fewer long-term rental units," Vandevere said. "It's a problem and something we need to think about as we move forward."

County official Melanie Beretti said staff will continue to refine the ordinance, and it will likely be brought back to the planning commission in late February, 2017.