

Short-term rental debate heats up again — especially in Big Sur

By CHRIS COUNTS

AFTER a series of public meetings on short-term rentals in late 2013 and early 2014 exposed deep divisions among the residents of unincorporated parts of Monterey County — especially Big Sur — a group is now meeting to try to come up with an ordinance regulating them, but allowing them.

But a number of Big Sur residents who oppose short-term rentals have formed a group — The Big Sur Local Coastal Program Defense Committee — and launched a website (www.bigsurlcp.com) to bring attention to their views on the practice, which they say will have “a devastating and permanent adverse effect” on the community.

Short-term rental advocates previously formed their own group, the Monterey County Vacation Rental Alliance, and created a website (www.mcvra.org) to promote the business, which they contend is “a win for the local economy, a win for neighborhoods, and a win for the industry.”



In Big Sur, where this house can be rented for a weekend, the subject of short-term rentals has caused much debate among neighbors. The county is trying to work out a solution

Is consensus possible?

Hosted by Monterey County 5th District Supervisor Dave Potter and his aide, Kathleen Lee, invitation-only meetings are being attended by about 20 individuals who live or work in Carmel Valley, unincorporated parts of Carmel, Carmel Highlands, Big Sur and Cachagua. Some are active in the short term rental business, while others have expressed concerns about its impact on neighborhoods.

The talks come about a year after the county released a pair of draft ordinances regulating short-term rentals and special events.

Facilitating the talks between county officials and residents is Melanie Beretti, who told The Pine Cone the group’s aim is to meet four times over the next two months and come up with the best possible ordinance that could apply to all the county’s unincorporated areas.

“For now, we’re not trying to dive into what Big Sur wants In Big Sur, where this house can be rented for a weekend, the subject of short-term rentals has caused much debate among neighbors. The county is trying to work out a solution or what Carmel Valley wants,” said Beretti, who took over as the

county's special programs manager in January. "We're trying to start with a broad approach. The goal of this group is to take our best shot and come up with a consensus."

During last year's public hearings on short-term rentals, some residents in Big Sur asked if their community could be excluded from the ordinance. They argued the business is not appropriate in the steep, rugged and scenic area, which has its own strict land use controls and an abundance of private, gated dirt roads.

While Beretti said the goal of the ongoing meetings is to come up with a blanket ordinance for the county, she said there will be an opportunity in the public process for residents to make their case to county supervisors that a particular area, such as Big Sur, could be excluded from it.

The subject of regulating short-term rentals on private roads will soon be discussed by the group.

"We haven't gotten there yet," Beretti said. "That's one of the big issues we want to look at. We want to bring in the county's counsel to help us."

Beretti said the county hopes to have the draft of the ordinance completed by the end of June and available for the public to comment on sometime in the summer.

Lee told The Pine Cone the talks are encouraging.

"We appreciate the effort everyone is putting into the working group, by taking the time to really walk through the details of this challenging issue with people who are representing different viewpoints on the topic. We remain optimistic that a solution can be reached."

The county permits short term rentals of seven to 29 days in inland areas. A similar ordinance for coastal areas was never OK'd by the California Coastal Commission. No county ordinance specifically prohibits short-term rentals.

In recent years, the short-term rental business has boomed in Monterey County, fueled in large part by the success of websites like airbnb.com, vrbo.com and homeaway.com.

Opposition group forms

The Big Sur Local Coastal Program Defense Committee — with members including prominent longtime residents Kirk Gafill, Ken and Mary Wright, Mary Trotter, Barbara Woyt, Steve Beck and Magnus Toren — is taking the stance that by permitting short-term rentals, the county is violating policies of the Big Sur Local Coastal Plan and the Monterey County General Plan.

"Monterey County, rather than enforcing the prohibition of short-term rentals, is currently taking taxes from them," a statement reads on its website. "By doing so, the county is encouraging and tacitly approving an activity that is illegal."

The group contends the practice will "negatively impact the community, its housing, its culture, and public access to the coast," and says it "cannot passively stand by while urban patterns, commercialization, and degradation of the environment take over."