

Supervisors take no action on vacation rentals

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After a lengthy discussion about possibly enacting regulations for vacation rentals, the Del Norte County Board of Supervisors decided to do nothing - at least not yet.

Supervisor Susan Masten asked for the discussion after a resident approached the board last month to complain about a short-term rental near his home.

“I thought it would be good opportunity for us to take a look at what other counties are doing as far as possible caps on vacation rentals,” Masten said. “We need to start looking at what those look like because we’re starting to reach a threshold so I think we should be prepared.”

After the issue was open to the public, people lined up to share their thoughts.

Rick Shirley, who served as the director of economic development in Utah before moving to Del Norte County, said demand for all rentals, short-term and long-term, have climbed quickly in recent years.

“The demand for rental properties has skyrocketed. As the same time, the demand for Air BnB type properties have skyrocketed,” Shirley said. “The same market forces influence both factors. The rest of the

state is on fire and in drought. People are fed up and people are looking at opportunities, and guess what, they found Del Norte County. We are struggling with housing for nurses, teachers, correctional officers and others in our community. It's easy to blame that on vacation rentals."

But, Shirley said, the lack of rental homes is not due to vacation rentals. In fact, he said, short-term rentals do provide a benefit.

"I do believe residents in the county may benefit from some regulations, but I also want to make sure we protect an important tourism resource," he said.

Sandy Moreno, a property manager in Crescent City, said a variety of issues has led to decreased rental properties.

"Over the last two years, I lost 50 percent of my properties I managed as long-term rentals," she said. "Half of those decided to go to vacation rentals. The other 50 percent sold their properties because it was such a great market. Some of my vacation rental people don't make that much money, maybe enough to pay their property taxes for the year."

Yvonne Powell, who owns two vacation rentals, told supervisors owning a vacation rental is not a way to get rich.

"Although we did recently buy an expensive property, buying a property is much different than having it paid for," she said. "We use the income from the vacation rental to pay the mortgage. If we were not able to do that, we would not be able to keep the property. This is our retirement. We're not doing it as a whim. We're not doing it to get wealthy. We are big fans of tourism. We love to see people come here and enjoy the place. It's a beautiful place."

Cindy Vosberg, the executive director of the Del Norte Crescent City Chamber of Commerce, told supervisors to be cautious when regulating business.

"Short-term rentals are vital sources of income for many businesses and help build tourism," Vosberg said. "They generate TOT dollars that help our county and city operate. If we want to continue to grow our tourism, we need to cultivate a way to do this. That includes vacation rentals."

Vosberg also acknowledged issues with long-term housing.

"The housing shortage is a multifaceted problem and it's not clear if we limit short-term rentals it will increase long-term rentals," she said.

Garrett Weber, who owns a vacation rental with his wife, said the market should decide, not government.

"This is how we supplement our retirement," he said. "This is not somebody who's super rich. I think the market will take care of the situation. If the occupancy rate drops, what will we do with our vacation rental? Most likely, we will make it into a longer-term rental. The market will have its voice."

Adam Rose, who owns two vacation rentals, also said owning a rental is not a sign of wealth.

“I reject the notion that only people with means can own vacation rentals or anyone gets rich off that process because that’s not true,” he said. “To address the idea these vacation rentals somehow present a situation where neighbors have to put up with noise. There is a pretty robust rating system on Air BnBs. You make up rules they have to follow.”

Rose said he lives next to a vacation rental, and he does occasionally have concerns. But when that happens, he handles it with the owner.

“I’m not going to go to the county and say what are you going to do about this. I’m going to take it up with our neighbors,” he said.

Kevin Hawkins, a real estate broker in Crescent City, also said government overreach could be devastating.

“Intentionally stifling financial growth is maybe one of the most idiotic things I can think about doing, and all because one person is afraid to speak to their neighbors about a problem,” he said. “You need to have communication in your community, you don’t need regulation in the community. The only thing this body should be doing is pushing for more growth, not stifling it.”

Vince Thompson started the conversation about vacation rentals when he complained to supervisors. He said his concern is not with his neighbors, but with the people they rent to.

“I’m the neighbor. Life is full of choices. We all make choices in life,” Thompson said. “I like my neighbors, but I don’t like the vacation rentals. Vacation rentals, people are on vacation, they’re having fun. They are commercial endeavors. Zoning is zoned residential. I think residential should stay residential. I get new people coming in every three days. Most of them are good, but then there’s that one. I’ve put up with a lot. If you’re going to continue with vacation rentals, make some limitations on them, do some inspections.”

After listening to the comments, the supervisors had their turn to talk. Not one pushed for limitations or rules on rentals at this time.

“This was only on here to begin for us to look at what’s out there because we haven’t begun to do any research,” Masten said. “It was in mind that it was a growing industry in Del Norte County. I think it’s time for us research it. I would like for staff to see what’s out there. At least we’re starting to familiarize us with the topic. I think it’s wise for us to be on top of it.”

While all the supervisors were happy to learn, the majority said there were just not enough problems right now to take any steps.

“I think it’s important for us to get on top of a crisis,” Supervisor Valerie Starkey said. “If it is a crisis, I think we need to get ahead of it. It doesn’t seem to be a crisis yet. While I can appreciate wanting to make sure it’s on our radar, I don’t think we need to act right now.”

“We’ve had a 50 percent growth in the last two years, and I’ve only heard personally two complaints. I don’t see that as an alarming situation that we need staff looking into or regulating,” Supervisor Darrin Short said.

“I run hot and cold on this thing. I’m conflicted between property rights, and on the other hand, I look at it as a commercial enterprise,” Supervisor Gerry Hemmingsen said. “I don’t think we’ve reached a crisis stage yet. I do think we may want to look into what we do if we do hit the crisis stage. I don’t think at this point we have consensus on the board with this thing. I think we’ll probably keep an eye on things and see what other counties are doing if we get a lot of complaints.”