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Preston panel approves Sawyer family proposal for large-scale winery

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Preston - Having subdued some of the fears associated with events that might be held at a large-scale winery, planning commissioners approved a proposal for such a facility, with several conditions.

More than a year ago, the Sawyer family sent a letter to the commission asking what was required for them to create a winery and vineyard on the more than 61 acres the family bought at 100 Miller Road in early 2007.

The letter caused a commotion among residents, particularly when the Planning and Zoning Commission created new regulations allowing such facilities. The town already allowed for smaller, more intimate vineyards.

Wednesday night, Stephen Sawyer, who, along with his wife, Ann, son, Andrew, and daughter-in-law Cara, now owns the property, said he never intended for such a reaction.

Cara Helms Sawyer told commissioners that it had been her and her husband's dream to own a vineyard. Stephen added that the family had been looking in Preston for property to create the vineyard and winery for several months.

"The main thrust of our business is to grow grapes and make wine," Ann Sawyer told commissioners.

Stephen Sawyer told commissioners that establishing the vineyard will be a long-term project. The family will gradually plant the required 5 acres of grapes over two to three years. The town's regulations require that the grapes be planted prior to any closed events - wedding receptions, for example - are held. The family could hold public wine tastings with just 2 acres of grapes so long as its wine-production facility is operational.

No one spoke in outright opposition to the plan, however some said they're greatly concerned about the entertainment aspect of the business.

Abutting neighbors specifically were worried about potential noise from outdoor events and increased traffic along the rural, hilly road.

In response, commissioners limited the amount of outdoor events, with the Sawyers' approval, to one outdoor event per week from May through October.

To keep traffic to a minimum, the family has offered to require shuttle vans or small buses to transport guests to larger events.

Also, the band or DJ playing at an outdoor event will be housed in a "music shed" roughly the size of a two-bay garage with insulated walls and one open side and included monitoring equipment.

Later in the evening, planning commissioners also approved the site plan for the project and discussed a request to separate 6 acres from the original 61 acres for a single-family house.

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