

Tony Novak, MBA, MT
Certified Public Accountant

P.O. Box 333, Newport NJ 08345
(856) 649-4171 onlineadviser@live.com

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Barbara Ernst
Cape May County Agricultural Development Board
4 Moore Road, DN 309,
Cape May Court House NJ 08210

RE: Public comment on Willow Creek Winery application

Dear Cape May County Agricultural Development Board:

I am writing to express a personal opinion on the matter of Willow Creek Winery's application to host public events under the state's pilot program to promote rural entertainment and tourism. I do not have any relationship with Willow Creek Winery or any other parties related to this application but I do work with a number of small agricultural businesses in Cape May, Cumberland and Salem Counties.

I trust that you are aware of the overall vulnerability of the region's small rural businesses. The local economy has not yet recovered from Sandy-related setbacks and now the threat of further declining economy in Atlantic City region threatens to keep the region in a state of recession for years to come. A study released last summer by the U.S. Conference of Mayors and HIS Global Insight predicts that for the rest of this decade the Atlantic City/Hammonton/South Jersey rural region will have one of the slowest economic growth rates of the entire United States. In short, many of our small local agricultural businesses are teetering on the verge of extinction under this climate of financial stress.

Meanwhile local organizations like the South Jersey Bayshore Coalition, BaySave, and the Cumberland County Delaware Bayshore Long Term Recovery Group are desperately working to come up with a sustainability plan for these rural businesses. Entertainment and tourism has been identified as one of the most promising strategies. As part of this sustainability planning, outside marketing and business development experts from various agencies have offered advice. I've been fortunate to hear some of the tourism and economic development presentations and ideas summarized in the 2014 Cumberland County Delaware Bayshore Recovery Plan. One dominant theme of these projects is the need to develop reasons to bring more people outdoors to enjoy our region's natural resources. The experts advise us to embrace the rough and natural state of our properties to find ways to offer food, lodging and entertainment to attract more visitors to the region. One recent presenter from the NJ Department of Community Affairs advised us to stop worrying that the visitor experience may not be 'polished' per modern standards, but to just to get out there and start inviting visitors to our rural properties "as is".

For this effort to work, we need government's cooperation. The usual regulations on traffic, parking, physical facilities, etc. are not appropriate during this early stage pilot program. It would be a mistake, in my opinion, for government to react to the imagined concerns of a small minority of neighbors over too much traffic and visitors that such tourism efforts may generate.

In summary, there is no factual basis to fear too many visitors on our regions farms. I urge you to support Willow Creek Winery's plans and attempts at leadership of the region's recovery plan.

Sincerely,



www.tonynovak.com