

Save Sonoma over 1100 Strong

A Comprehensive Case Against the Proposed GLUP Mixed-Use Changes for the Sebastiani Properties

Executive Summary

The proposed General Land Use Plan (GLUP) changes to allow mixed-use development on the historic Sebastiani properties represent a fundamental departure from Sonoma's adopted planning principles, community values, and public-safety obligations, while exposing taxpayers to **unknown and potentially substantial infrastructure and insurance-related costs**. Framed as an economic solution, the proposal rests on optimistic assumptions that are unlikely to materialize and would instead produce irreversible harm: increased wildfire risk, evacuation failures, loss of agricultural land and historic resources, erosion of Sonoma's identity and sense of place, retail bleed from the historic core, and a precedent that undermines the integrity of the GLUP itself—specifically **Goal LU-3**.

Applying a single mixed-use designation with a wide residential density range to the Sebastiani property departs from common California planning practice for historically significant, fire-constrained, and partially operational sites. Comparable jurisdictions typically rely on site-specific planning tools to manage sensitive properties, limit residential intensity, and preserve historic and agricultural assets. A blanket zoning approach risks irreversible impacts on a site that functions as a historic winery and agricultural campus. It offers the current owners, and potential future investors, a vacant redevelopment opportunity.

Critically, the proposal ignores viable and safer alternatives already available to the City, including **vacant parcels along established commercial corridors and the adaptive reuse or repurposing of outdated commercial buildings for residential and mixed residential uses**. It also fails to account for the **likely bleeding of retail and visitor-serving uses away from the Plaza, Broadway, and existing commercial districts**, weakening Sonoma's historic commercial core.

This treatise consolidates the principal arguments raised by citizens, experts, and community stakeholders and sets forth a clear alternative path forward grounded in infill development, preservation, transparency, and adherence to the adopted plan—while recognizing the risks of **profit extraction by out-of-area development interests**, the permanent loss of historic buildings, agricultural land, and the Sonoma way of life, and the reality that **once mixed-use zoning is adopted, many subsequent developments would proceed by-right with little or no future public input**.

We formally include this link to 1142 signatures opposed to the Mixed-Use planning for the Sebastiani Parcels: [Save Sonoma Petition Link](#)

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I. Why the Development Is Being Proposed

Proponents of the mixed-use rezoning argue that:

- Wine-country economic pressures justify new residential and hotel development.
- Adaptive reuse of winery land will broaden the tax base.
- Mixed-use development is portrayed as inevitable and aligned with growth trends.

However, these claims conflate short-term fiscal hopes with long-term planning obligations and overlook safer, more appropriate alternatives already contemplated within the GLUP.

II. Wishful Thinking and Why the Proposal Is Unlikely to Work

The proposal depends on several optimistic assumptions:

- That high-risk fire zones can be safely intensified with residential and hotel uses.
- That evacuation infrastructure can absorb hundreds of new residents and visitors.
- That demand for mixed-use development at this location will remain strong over decades.

History across California demonstrates that projects sited in Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones face escalating insurance costs, financing challenges, liability exposure, and operational instability. These realities undermine both economic feasibility and public safety.

III. Fire Safety and Evacuation Risks

The Sebastiani properties lie within a **Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone**. Key concerns include:

- Limited evacuation routes are already strained during peak visitor periods.
- The introduction of a hotel population unfamiliar with local evacuation protocols.
- Increased demand for fire and emergency services without demonstrated funding, staffing, or equipment guarantees.

Approving dense mixed-use development in such conditions contradicts best practices in wildfire-adapted community planning.

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IV. Loss of Way of Life, Identity, and Sense of Place

Sonoma is not merely a location—it is a wine-farming town with a distinct cultural and historical identity. The proposed rezoning would:

- Replace working agricultural land with urbanized uses.
- Diminish the rural-to-town transition that defines Sonoma's character.
- Signal that heritage landscapes are expendable when market pressures arise.

Once lost, this sense of place cannot be reclaimed.

V. Loss of Agricultural Land and Historic Buildings

The Sebastiani properties are historically and agriculturally significant:

- Listed as a historic property in California, registration Date: 6/6/1960
- They embody Sonoma's wine-growing legacy.
- Historic winery buildings and landscapes are integral, not incidental to the town's identity.

Mixed-use conversion risks incremental degradation, incompatible alterations, and eventual loss of these irreplaceable resources.

VI. Fiscal Uncertainty and Infrastructure Cost Exposure

A material issue that has not been adequately disclosed or analyzed is the **potential cost to taxpayers** arising from infrastructure demands created by mixed-use development on the Sebastiani properties. These include, but are not limited to:

- Roadway upgrades and traffic mitigation
- Water, sewer, and stormwater capacity expansion
- Fire protection, emergency response, and evacuation infrastructure
- Ongoing maintenance and lifecycle costs borne by the City

Absent a transparent, site-specific fiscal impact analysis, the public is being asked to accept open-ended financial risk based on optimistic assumptions rather than documented commitments. These risks are compounded by **insurance market instability in high fire-hazard**

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zones and the likelihood that additional development would require **expanded fire protection staffing, equipment, water resources, and mutual-aid capacity**, costs that frequently fall in part to local taxpayers when coverage gaps emerge. If private commercial insurance becomes unavailable or prohibitively expensive, reliance on the **FAIR Plan or other residual-risk mechanisms** shifts financial exposure to the broader public, effectively placing taxpayers on the hook for risks the private market has deemed uninsurable.

VII. Lack of Transparency and Process Concerns

Public trust has been weakened by:

- Perceived pre-decisional momentum toward mixed-use outcomes.
- Workshops focused on *how* to implement mixed-use rather than *whether* it is appropriate.
- Limited clarity regarding fiscal impacts, water availability, emergency-service capacity, and long-term liabilities.

Transparent governance requires open consideration of alternatives, not managed consensus.

VIII. The By-Right Reality: Why This Decision Is Effectively Irreversible

A critical but often misunderstood consequence of adopting mixed-use zoning is that many future projects would be permitted **by-right**. In practical terms, this means:

- Projects that conform to the zoning may proceed without discretionary approval
- Public hearings and meaningful community input are significantly reduced or eliminated
- Environmental review and appeal opportunities are limited
- The City's ability to respond to changed conditions—such as fire risk, evacuation capacity, or infrastructure strain—is constrained

For residents, this means the current rezoning decision is likely the **last meaningful opportunity for public oversight** of development intensity on the Sebastiani properties. While today's proposal may appear limited in scope, the zoning change itself establishes a framework for future intensification with far fewer checks and balances.

Understanding this by-right reality underscores why caution, transparency, and strict adherence to the GLUP are essential at this stage.

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IX. The Case for Infill Development

Infill development offers a fiscally responsible alternative that **minimizes taxpayer exposure** while supporting housing and economic vitality. By locating growth within areas already served by roads, utilities, emergency services, and evacuation infrastructure, infill development:

- Reduces the need for costly new public infrastructure
- Limits long-term maintenance and service obligations
- Avoids placing additional strain on fire, police, and emergency response systems
- Aligns growth with areas where insurance availability and service coverage are more stable

Infill development is not merely a planning preference—it is a prudent fiscal and public-safety strategy fully consistent with the GLUP’s intent.

The GLUP already provides a responsible growth strategy:

- Direct growth to infill areas with existing infrastructure.
- Concentrate commercial activity along the Plaza, Broadway, and established corridors.
- Protect edge, agricultural, and high-risk lands from intensified use.

Infill development strengthens the town without endangering residents or eroding heritage.

X. Citizen Action: Referendum and Repeal

With more than 1,000 signatures gathered, citizens have demonstrated:

- Broad concern about the proposed rezoning.
- Willingness to pursue a referendum if necessary.
- A belief that repeal remains possible—and appropriate—if the City proceeds contrary to the GLUP and public safety.

This is not opposition to planning; it is defense of the adopted plan.

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XI. Violation of GLUP Goal LU-3

GLUP Goal LU-3 emphasizes:

- Protection of agricultural lands.
- Preservation of community character.
- Directing growth to appropriate, lower-risk areas.

Rezoning the Sebastiani properties for mixed-use development directly conflicts with these principles and sets a precedent that weakens the entire GLUP framework.

Conclusion

The proposed mixed-use rezoning of the Sebastiani properties is unnecessary, risky, and inconsistent with Sonoma's adopted land-use goals. Economic challenges do not justify abandoning fire safety, historic preservation, agricultural protection, or transparent governance. Sonoma has a plan that works—if it is followed.

*Roots Run Deep is a marketing slogan originated in 2013 by the Sonoma Valley Vintners & Growers Alliance. Their message is: "As the birthplace of world class California wine, Sonoma Valley provides the most fulfilling connection to our rich history and to a deeply rooted community."

Sonoma is the birthplace of California wine - in 1857. 169 years ago.