

PUBLIC COMMENTOR 201 - JAMES SORRELLS, SEPTEMBER 24, 1996

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Madam Chairwoman, Ladies and Gentlemen of the panel, my name is James Sorrells. I'm a resident of Guerneville, and I've come before you today as one of the directors of the Russian River region visitors bureau.

The Russian River region was established in 1953 to promote tourism along the lower Russian River from Cloverdale to the Sonoma Coast. The board of directors of the Russian River region visitors bureau feel strongly that the Environmental Impact Report does not adequately address the potential impact on tourism of increasing discharge into the Russian River. There are only three and a half pages out of 8,500 pages of the Environmental Impact Report that even address the impact of tourism. That's one and a half pages of text and two pages in the appendices of collection of transient occupancy tax.

Tourism is a major Sonoma County industry in the lower Russian River. And the lower Russian River is an important element in that industry. [The EIR acknowledges that additional discharge added to runoff from additional -- increased runoff from development may increase the possibility of flooding along the lower river.] The EIR also acknowledges that publicity and education may not convince the public that additional discharge has not made the river unhealthy and unsafe. [If either flooding or negative public perception occurs, the impact on tourism could be profound. Yet nowhere in the EIR is there an economic analysis of that potential impact.] It is unquestionably true that property values would drop, taxes collected from sales, transient occupancy and property would be diminished, jobs would be lost, businesses would fail, and the overall effect on Sonoma County's economic base would be extremely detrimental. But again, there's no economic analysis of that impact whatsoever. [The very meager EIR section on tourism refers to resort owners who were interviewed regarding their views of the public's views about the river and discharges in the past and planned increased discharges. We, the Russian River visitors bureau, have been unable to find a single resort owner who was interviewed. Who are these resort owners? We really would like for the authors, the consultants, the people who prepared the EIR to release a list of the resort owners who were interviewed and the questions that were asked. This is a scientific study. It should be approached scientifically.] In the meantime, we have conducted our own survey of owners of accommodations along the lower river and we have furthermore surveyed real estate professionals regarding the impact which increased discharge may have on the real estate industry in Sonoma County. The results of both of those surveys will be made available to the public and to the press in the very near future. We're not arguing for or against any of the options examined by the EIR, but we insist that none of those options be chosen without a careful examination of the impact on tourism, one of Sonoma County's most valuable industries. Thank you very much.

Mayor Wright:

Okay, Dr. Wickham?