



COUNTY OF SONOMA

575 ADMINISTRATION
DRIVE, ROOM 102A
SANTA ROSA, CA 95403

SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 12/9/2025

To: Board of Supervisors

Department or Agency Name(s): Permit Sonoma

Staff Name and Phone Number: Scott Orr and Katerina Mahdavi, (707) 565-1900

Vote Requirement: Majority

Supervisory District(s): Countywide

Title:

10:35 A.M. Periodic Special (formerly Cultural) Events Zoning Code Update

Recommended Action:

Hold a public hearing and adopt an ordinance finding the action exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3) and amending Sonoma County Code Chapter 26 (Zoning Regulations), Articles 06, 22, and 88 to establish a cap on the number of attendees allowed at periodic special events permitted with a Zoning Permit, and to clarify periodic special event permitting processes, public noticing procedures, and term definitions.

Executive Summary:

Periodic special events, formerly called cultural events, are permitted in all zoning districts ministerially through a zoning permit. Proposed amendments to the County Code address needed clarifications and align standards with interpretations and practices for efficient and consistent processing of periodic special event permit applications.

The proposed ordinance includes a 2,500-person cap on the number of attendees for periodic special events issued under a Zoning Permit. For events exceeding 2,500 attendees at any one time, additional impact analysis is to be addressed with a Use Permit. The current ordinance language is silent on event size. Recent applications for recurring events that attract a high number of attendees have demonstrated that site-specific analysis is needed to adequately assess and reduce impacts of larger periodic special events, which is not feasible through a ministerial permitting process. Other proposed code amendments will create consistency in the language used throughout the zoning code and clarify the frequency of allowed events, permitting requirements, and public noticing procedures.

The Planning Commission considered the proposed code amendments on September 4, 2025, and voted 3-2-0 to recommend the Board approve the ordinance, with a recommendation that the ordinance take effect at least six months after the date of its passage to allow for community outreach on the new attendee cap.

Discussion:

Background

The general definition for occasional or periodic special events (formerly called cultural events in the Sonoma County Zoning Code) is “parades, concerts, festivals, races, and gatherings which attract, either by direct participation, or as

spectators, a large gathering of people” (Zoning Code Section 26-22-120). This definition has remained largely unchanged since 1990. The 1990 zoning ordinance also identified an avenue for appeal of periodic special events. The primary subject of the proposed ordinance is periodic special events on private property as defined above. Permit Sonoma also processes permits for special events conducted within the public right-of-way through a special event encroachment permit (SPE File). Other types of permitted events include Agricultural Promotional Events, an additional event category specific to wineries which are beyond the defined activities during standard daily operations that are directly related to public education, sales and promotion of agricultural products to consumers, including but not limited to winemaker lunches, dinners, release parties, and wine club parties and similar events (Zoning Code Section 26-18-260).

Periodic Special Events vs. Winery Events

The proposed amendments will not affect the existing *Winery Definitions and Standards* in Zoning Code Section 26-18-260, which are specific to wineries, tasting rooms, and winery related events and which require a use permit for the land use entitlement. Additional events processed as periodic special events with a zoning permit may be allowed unless the use permit is conditioned otherwise. The proposed ordinance would have no impact on winery event activities or permitting of similar agricultural promotional events.

Although it is anticipated that amendments to land use regulations governing periodic special events and similar activities will be further evaluated during the ongoing comprehensive General Plan Update, with input from the Planning Commission, Board of Supervisors, and broader community, the current proposed amendments will provide much needed clarification on noticing procedures and events definitions and thresholds.

Past interpretations from the Board of Zoning Adjustments and Permit Sonoma management have permitted up to four periodic special events occurring over a two-year period on any given site, similar to current allowances for events on agricultural farmstays, as permitted by Zoning Code Section 26-88-085.

Proposed Code Amendments

The proposed ordinance includes the following amendments to the Zoning Code. The full code revisions are shown in the Proposed Ordinance (Attachment 1).

- **Amendments to Section 26-06-030 and Section 26-88-085** to improve consistency and clarity throughout the Zoning Code by replacing references to temporary events, cultural events, and occasional cultural events with the term “periodic special events,” in alignment with the definitions in Article 04.
- **Amendments to Section 26- 22-120** to:
 - Codify the longstanding department interpretation that periodic or occasional events may occur no more than four times within a two-year period;
 - Require separate zoning permits for all periodic special events held 30 or more days apart;
 - Reduce the maximum number of allowed attendees from unlimited to 2,500 for all periodic special events permitted with a Zoning Permit;

- Require a Use Permit for all periodic special events with more than 2,500 attendees; and
- Remove redundant appeal and hearing procedures and clarify that courtesy public notices are provided to neighbors of a proposed event site after ministerial permit issuance.

Cap on Attendees

Currently, there is no size limit on periodic special events. Because periodic special events are permitted ministerially in any zoning district, Permit Sonoma is not able to conduct site-specific analysis during the permitting process to evaluate potential impacts of larger events, such as noise or traffic. Based on an audit of event permits since 2016, approximately 90 percent of the 85 events analyzed were for less than 2,500 attendees, with an average event size of 760 attendees. The proposed ordinance would establish a maximum of 2,500 attendees per event until more specific parameters based on site conditions and location can be developed with the General Plan Update. Further amendments to policies and regulations for periodic special events and other types of event activities may be evaluated during the comprehensive General Plan Update (i.e. [General Plan Sonoma <https://permitsonoma.org/generalplan>](https://permitsonoma.org/generalplan)).

A policy option to exceed the proposed cap on attendees with a use permit was presented to and ultimately recommended by the Planning Commission with staff's recommendation that the permit be time-limited for five years, prohibit permanent site improvements, allow no more than two events per year on a site, and be tied to the property owner at the time of application. The option to exceed the cap with a use permit has been incorporated into the proposed ordinance.

Planning Commission Review

The Planning Commission reviewed the proposed code amendments on September 4, 2025. The Commission directed staff to revise the effective date of the proposed ordinance to at least six months after the date of adoption to avoid conflicts with already permitted or planned events and to allow for Permit Sonoma to conduct outreach to the public and event coordinators about the changes and attendee cap.

The Commission emphasized the importance of utilizing the General Plan Update as an opportunity to conduct a comprehensive analysis and possibly develop corresponding code revisions. While the proposed ordinance is expected to address the procedural concerns related to definitions, scale, and noticing, the Commission concurred that a more extensive update and detailed site-specific analysis will be necessary to fully achieve the intended outcomes related to periodic special events.

The Planning Commission recommended approval of the proposed code amendments, including the cap on the number of attendees with an option to exceed the cap with a Use Permit, and an effective date of at least six months after adoption of the proposed ordinance.

Policy Option for Board Consideration

Based on the Planning Commission's discussion, staff is presenting an alternative to the Use Permit option that would exempt any periodic special event that also requires a special event encroachment permit (SPE File) to operate within the public right-of-way. Events conducted entirely on private property would be subject to the cap of 2,500 attendees without a use permit.

Environmental Review

The proposed amendments to the Zoning Code are exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3) because CEQA applies only to projects which have the potential for causing a significant effect on the environment. The project involves minor updates to Zoning Code to clarify definitions and codify current procedure and practice. The amendments do not change the number of events allowed under current Permit Sonoma policy. The current Zoning Code text does not limit the number of attendees at periodic special events, and this ordinance would specify a cap on attendees. It can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility the proposed Zoning Code amendments will result in a direct or indirect physical change in the environment.

General Plan Consistency

The proposed zoning code amendments are overall compatible with the goals, objectives, and policies of the Sonoma County General Plan that seek to reduce land use impacts, including but not limited to noise and traffic, and support

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tourism and economic activity. The proposed amendments do not conflict with any General Plan policy because the General Plan does not limit the frequency or size of periodic special events.

Strategic Plan:

N/A

Racial Equity:

Was this item identified as an opportunity to apply the Racial Equity Toolkit?

No

Prior Board Actions:

10/25/2022: Amendments to Article VI of Chapter 15 of the Sonoma County Code related to permitting of special events in the public right-of-way (Ordinance No. 6393)

FISCAL SUMMARY

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

There are no fiscal impacts associated with this item.

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

There are no staffing impacts associated with this item.

Attachments:

Attachment 1. Draft Ordinance and Exhibit A

Attachment 2. Planning Commission Staff Report, dated September 4, 2025

Attachment 3. Planning Commission Resolution No. 25-12

Attachment 4. PowerPoint Presentation

Attachment 5. Legal Notice of Public Hearing and Pre-Adoption Summary and Affidavit

Related Items "On File" with the Clerk of the Board:

N/A