



County of Santa Cruz

Department of Community Development and Infrastructure

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February 16, 2024

Agenda: February 28, 2024

Planning Commission
County of Santa Cruz
701 Ocean Street
Santa Cruz, CA 95060

SUBJECT: Public hearing on recommendation to the Board of Supervisors regarding the proposed Low-Impact Camping Area Ordinance.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

- 1) Conduct a public hearing on the proposed Low-Impact Camping Area Ordinance;
- 2) Consider the proposed Draft Low Impact Camping Ordinance and provide recommendations to the Board of Supervisors.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This proposed ordinance would define and allow for “low impact camping areas” for the purpose of making it easier to establish small, low-impact campgrounds in unincorporated areas of the County. The ordinance would increase access to outdoor activities to residents of all income levels, expanding opportunities for land preservation and stewardship, and providing additional Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) to the County. The low impact camping areas would be limited to areas outside of the Urban and Rural Services Lines on parcels based on zoning and size.

BACKGROUND

Our region is an internationally recognized destination for outdoor recreation with locals and visitors who enjoy hiking, climbing, surfing, and countless other outdoor activities. The relatively low cost and low availability of local campgrounds results in reservations (generally at state campgrounds) frequently filling up many months in advance at popular destinations. As a result, many visitors, especially low-income households, are not able to access our region’s scenic areas.

Santa Cruz County lacks affordable camping options so that all local residents and visitors can enjoy our region’s natural beauty, and low-impact campgrounds would serve to fill this void. Low-impact campgrounds should be small camping areas with no more than nine campsites and minimal infrastructure. Due to their small footprint, hosts should be able to provide these sites for fees that are affordable to most households.

The funds generated by these low-impact sites can be reinvested directly back into land stewardship and preservation, and adoption of this ordinance would harmonize with the Board of Supervisors' goals of supporting rural economies and agritourism, by creating new revenue streams for rural landowners and farmers. Additionally, low-impact camping is an affordable access point to the outdoors and coastal area - key elements of both improving equity and access to these natural areas.

Earlier this year this Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to support Senate Bill 620, which would make it easier to establish small, low-impact campgrounds in the state's scenic areas. The proposed ordinance would mirror much of the state legislation, which is supported by the California State Association of Counties, California Farm Bureau Federation, Latino Outdoors, Save the Redwoods League, the Nature Conservancy and many more organizations.

On November 14, 2023, CDI and the Parks Department were directed by the Board of Supervisors to prepare a draft ordinance to allow low-impact camping areas in unincorporated areas of the county outside the Urban and Rural Services Lines.

In the process of preparing this ordinance (see Exhibit A), Staff held an internal kickoff meeting on December 20, 2023, with the Development Review and Public Works sections of the Community Development & Infrastructure Department, County Parks, Environmental Health Division, County Fire Marshal's Office, County Sheriff's Office. The comments and questions were around the following:

- Look at what other counties such as Sonoma and Santa Barbara Counties have done successfully.
- Keep campsites outside of environmental resource areas.
- Require clustering of sites to best afford for water usage, access onto properties, waste management.
- Afford a maximum number of people to maintain low impact.
- Require applicants to obtain Environmental Health approval prior to visiting the zoning counter.

Staff has also held a stakeholder meeting on February 12, 2024, to obtain comments and input from those who have the most involvement in the ordinance at a state, regional, or local level. The Stakeholders were both internal and external Stakeholders, including those supporting the Bill at the State level, as well as County Parks and Recreation. Following a very production discussion, many clarifications were made, but no substantive changes to the ordinance suggested at that time.

On February 15, the Agricultural Policy Advisory Commission reviewed the draft ordinance for ensure consistency with County Agricultural policies and had the following recommendations:

- Require a 200-foot setback buffer to adjacent CA land (Agricultural Resource Type Land)
- Prohibit pets within 200 feet of CA land (Agricultural Resource Type Land)
- Require a campsite property within 200 feet of CA land (Agricultural Resource Type Land) to record an Agricultural Acknowledgement.

ANALYSIS

This proposed ordinance would create a definition, permit process, and corresponding requirements for a “low-impact camping area” in the County Code (new section 13.10.695). Additionally, the proposed ordinance would create a framework of health/safety regulations including compliance with all noise, fire, trash, and sanitation requirements for establishing low-impact camping in specified zoning areas in the unincorporated area. The proposal would also make low-impact camping areas subject to the County’s TOT requirements, similar to all other visitor-serving accommodations, including camping sites.

Here are some key highlights of the proposed Low Impact Camping Ordinance:

- Maximum camp sites: Low-impact camping area would be defined as a maximum of nine total campsites per property with a density limit of one campsite per acre using non-permanent structures including tents, yurts, canvass/soft-sided structures and recreational vehicles (as defined) intended for overnight use.
- Minimum parcel size: There would be an acreage minimum of five acres (meaning only parcels of five acres or greater would qualify for a permit).
- Allowed Zones: Low impact camping would only be allowed outside of the Urban and Rural Service Lines and on parcels with the following zoning designations: Agriculture (A), Commercial Agriculture (CA), Residential Agriculture (RA), Timber Production (TP), Special Use (SU), Parks, Recreation and Open Space (PR), or Public Facilities (PF).
- Permits: Permits and TOT registration shall be required for each low impact camping area. Applicants for a new low-impact camping area shall provide a completed application form, nonrefundable application fee and copy of County of Santa Cruz TOT certificate number, or proof of registry with a verified online platform (that pays TOT).
- Parking: Neighborhood parking impact shall be mitigated by requiring at least one off-street parking space for each site in the low impact camping area. No on-street parking would be allowed.
- Management: Low impact camping areas shall have a designated operator or property manager who is available by phone 24 hours a day, seven days a week when sites are occupied.
- Noise: All low impact camping areas shall comply with the County Noise Ordinance (SCCC 8.30). No activities that produce noise, dust, odor, or vibration detrimental to occupants of adjoining properties are allowed within the low impact camping area.
- Setbacks: Sites within low impact camping areas shall be located no closer than 50 feet from any property line or environmentally sensitive area and 200 feet from any off-site residence.
- Health/Safety: All sites shall conform to local fire, solid waste, and sanitation regulations.
- Violations: Permits shall be revoked if multiple violations occur within a twelve-month period.
- Agricultural Uses: Low impact camping is incidental to agricultural use and shall not displace any agricultural activity.

This ordinance would be applicable within the Coastal Zone and would be part of the County's Local Coastal Program's implementing ordinances. Following adoption of the ordinance by the Board of Supervisors, Staff would submit the adopted to the Coastal Commission for approval in the Coastal Zone. As directed by the Board of Supervisors, the ordinance would take effect in areas outside of the Coastal Zone 31 days after the second reading by the Board of Supervisors and within the Coastal Zone upon certification by the Coastal Commission.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

The proposed County Code amendments are exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA") pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3) because the amendments provide regulations for future camping area and therefore do not present the possibility of a significant impact on the environment.

The County Code and General Plan, as well as hearing agendas and additional information are available online at: www.sccoplanning.com

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Exhibits

A. Draft Ordinance