

Do We Want Commercial Marijuana in Bennett Valley?

By Craig S. Harrison, President, BVCA Board

Six limited liability companies (LLCs) have applied for permits to grow cannabis within the Bennett Valley Area Plan. The promoters of the marijuana industry told the Board of Supervisors that most applicants for permits under the Sonoma County Cannabis Land Use Ordinance would be "mom and pop" farmers who have been growing cannabis for years.

As the following table indicates, permit applicants here are investors who mostly lack ties to our community. Each is an LLC, which hides the identities of the investors from neighbors and tax authorities. An LLC or trust owns each parcel, and title changed for five of the properties in 2017. The addresses on public documents indicate the LLCs are based in Chicago, San Mateo, Tiburon, and San Francisco. Two have some connection to Sonoma County. The addresses of three LLCs are mail drops at UPS stores. We know little about the investors, who want to convert Bennett Valley into marijuana farms for profit, except that most don't live here.

APN	Santa Rosa Address	Applicant and Location	Land Owner and Location
049-130-015	4944 Bennett Valley Road	Stonehouse Farms LLC UPS P.O. box in SR?	Kevin King Trust Santa Rosa or Napa?
049-150-005	4050 Grange Road	Sonoma Grange Farms LLC UPS P.O. box in San Mateo?	Bennett Rosa LLC San Mateo?
049-130-005	4065 Grange Road	CLS LLC Tiburon?	Bennett Rosa LLC UPS P.O. box in San Mateo?
055-140-015	3575 Matanzas Creek Lane	Cannaforia LLC Palm Springs or Geyserville?	3754 Matanzas Creek LLC San Francisco?
055-140-006	3700 Matanzas Creek Lane	Farmacure LLC Stoney Point Rd, Santa Rosa?	Mary Chalmers Trust Santa Rosa?
055-140-024	3803 Matanzas Creek Lane	Matanzas Creek Alliance LLC Chicago?	SRG3541 Regional Pkwy LLC, Chicago?

While the applications for two of the properties (4944 Bennett Valley Road and 4050 Grange Road) aren't complete, Permit Sonoma is currently allowing the operators to grow marijuana without a permit. Restaurants, wine tasting rooms, and hog farms can't operate for over a year while waiting for a permit. Who builds a house without a building permit? The greenhouse at 3803 Matanzas Creek Lane has an outstanding notice of violation.

The purpose of zoning is to protect communities from incompatible land uses. Marijuana cultivation is a lucrative business that has long been associated with crime and violence. In September, two men were killed in Forestville, the latest in a long series of marijuana-related homicides in our county. The owners of the LLCs undermine rather than build our community.

As our community heals and rebuilds from the October fires, many take for granted the serene and safe sanctuary we call home. However, in the 1980s methamphetamine laboratories were operating here, including three residences near me that were purchased in foreclosure sales after being trashed. Bennett Valley today is fashionable, but if we aren't vigilant our quality of life and property values could deteriorate if the criminal activity often associated with commercial marijuana materializes.

Our supervisors can revise the zoning to ban commercial cannabis in our community. Alternatively, if they don't, a ballot initiative could revise the Bennett Valley Plan to ban it from our area. California voters legalized the statewide commercial cultivation of marijuana, with certain limitations. Marijuana cultivation is still a violation of Federal Law. Bennett Valley voters should be able to decide whether we want it here.