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Categorical Exemption Memorandum

Vine Cliff Winery Alteration Use Permit and Minor Modification
P25-00161-UP & P24-00191-MM
Planning Commission Hearing – June 18, 2025



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Planning, Building & Environmental Services

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Brian D. Bordona
Director

To:	Brian D. Bordona, PBES Director	From:	Andrew Amelung, Planner II
Date:	June 18, 2025	Re:	P25-00161-UP & P24-00191-MM Vine Cliff Winery Alteration Categorical Exemptions Determination 7400 Silverado Trail, Napa, CA APN: 032-030-027-000

Background:

On July 15, 2024, the applicant submitted a request for approval of a Use Permit for an Exception to the Conservation Regulations for development activity on slopes over 30 percent, and approval of a Use Permit Minor Modification for 1) the conversion of an existing 6,762 square-foot winery structure with 4,424 square feet of production area and 2,338 square feet of accessory area into a 4,643 square-foot winery structure with 1,064 square feet of production area and 3,579 square feet of accessory area; 2) the conversion and expansion of an existing 15,000 square-foot winery production cave and an existing 2,751 square-foot historic barrel storage cave into 20,174 square feet of winery cave area with 16,328 square feet of production area and 3,846 square feet of accessory area; 3) the remodeling and relocation of existing covered crush pad, production area, tasting area, laboratory, employee offices, guest restrooms, employee break room, and restrooms; 4) the addition of a guest elevator between building levels; 5) the addition of a high-risk kitchen for on-site food preparation; 6) the conversion of the existing crush pad into an entry courtyard for guests; 7) the addition of a second cave portal to the primary production cave; 8) the installation a fire water storage area, fire pump room and fire sprinklers and insulation that meet Type III Occupancy standards for the cave; and 9) the conversion of approximately 10,000 square feet of asphalt driveway and parking area into a garden plaza. The winery is on a 99.59-acre parcel on the east side of Silverado Trail between Oakville Cross Rd to the north and Yountville Cross Rd to the south, just northwest of Rector Reservoir, within the Agricultural Watershed (AW) zoning district and Agriculture, Watershed and Open Space (AWOS) General Plan designation, located at 7400 Silverado Trail, Napa, CA 94558. APN: 032-030-027-000.

Existing Conditions and Environment Setting:

The approximately 99.59-acre parcel includes the winery development, cave, vineyards, primary residence, a secondary dwelling unit, a farm labor dwelling unit, and a solar array, with approximately 55 acres of undeveloped grassland, shrubland, oak woodland and coniferous woodland. Land uses in the vicinity of the project site include vineyards, grasslands, forest land, and residences. The winery is

located approximately 1,000 feet from the Silverado Trail, and all applicable setbacks, including stream setbacks for an ephemeral watercourse, have been met. The nearest offsite residence is approximately 1,250 feet to the north. The 349.57-acre parcel to the southeast is owned by the State of California as part of the Rector Reservoir Wildlife Area. The closest significant stream is Rector Creek where it is released from Rector Reservoir, which is approximately 2,470 feet away, and the closest neighboring well is 1,275 feet to the north.

The applicants submitted a biological survey report completed by Salix Consulting, Inc., dated July 2024, which concluded that there were no on-site occurrences of threatened or endangered plant or animal habitats, special status species, or sensitive biotic communities or habitats based on a California Natural Diversity Database query. A subsequent addendum was submitted to further address the identification of vegetation layers, wildlife corridors, and some discrepancies between the submitted report and Napa County Environmental Resources Mapping of special status species habitat and the submitted report. Both the Biological Survey Report and the subsequent addendum conclude that there will not be any adverse impacts on biological resources. As part of their project description, the applicant plans to have the one oak tree marked for removal surveyed for bats and nesting birds prior to removal.

The majority of development will occur on previously disturbed areas consisting of the winery building footprint, the existing cave, and an impervious asphalt surface. The new covered crush pad and cave portal entrance, as well as an area with an existing parking area and retaining wall will require development on land over that is over 30 percent sloped. Development on slopes over 30 percent require an Exception to Napa County Conservation Regulations through the issuance of a Use Permit, as described in Napa County Code (NCC) § 18.108.060(A).

The proposed covered crush pad, and driveway leading up to it, as well as other structures on the property, have been designed to use the available area, primarily the area between the existing cave footprint and the access road, in a way that predominately falls parallel to natural contours, with the use of proposed retaining walls to avoid excessive grading and maintain the surrounding hillside. The structures were designed to fit into the natural topography to reduce earthwork and surface ground disturbance. Retaining walls have been stepped where necessary to minimize earthwork. Through the utilization, expansion, and improvement of an existing onsite cave, the project has been designed in a manner that minimizes grading and earthmoving activities by maintaining the smallest footprint possible, and where the footprint is expanded it is taking place primarily in an area of previously disturbed impervious surface, with much of it replaced by a garden plaza with pervious surface for better surface-to-groundwater flow across the project.

The overall development area consists of mild to steep slopes, with four sections in areas with slopes over 30 percent. These sections include 1) a 3,408 square-foot development area with an average slope of 41.02 percent near one of the cave hospitality areas; 2) a 1,295 square-foot development area with an average slope of 42.69 percent near the entry courtyard for guests; 3) a 1,177 square-foot development area with an average slope of 42.96 percent near the tunnel that connects the winery structure to the historic barrel storage cave; and 4) a 2,805 square-foot development area with an average slope of 48.25 percent where the new covered crush pad and production cave portal will be located. Development on areas with an average slope over 30 percent will require the granting of a Use Permit for an Exception to Conservation Regulations, as described in NCC § 18.108.060(A). Grading activities in these areas will

allow for some hillside restoration back to the original slope where feasible, with the use of retaining walls in other locations to minimize the amount grading activities. One live oak will be removed due to its proximity to the proposed cave portal, and it will be replaced at a 3:1 replanting ratio. The oak tree being removed is not fully mature, is not considered scenic, and the applicants plan to have the tree surveyed by a biologist for bats or nesting birds prior to removal. Some non-native ornamental species will be removed to allow for new landscaping, and landscaped areas along the existing watercourse will be preserved. The removal of a section of the existing impervious driveway and parking area at the entrance of both the cave and the hospitality structure, and the installation of a garden plaza in its place, will result in an overall enhancement in both the quality and quantity of vegetation on site.

The proposed project does not include any disturbances to streams or watercourse, and the development does not encroach upon the 35-foot setback in place for the existing, onsite ephemeral watercourse. At the project site, the ephemeral watercourse can be avoided as it works through existing culverts and closed conduits through the project site, which are considered man-made and not biologically sensitive. The project proposes improvements to the existing driveway to meet Napa County Road and Street standards. The project also proposes a fire water storage area and fire pump room as part of the cave improvements, with the addition of fire sprinklers that will bring it into Type III Occupancy compliance.

Entitlement History:

Wine production on the parcel has occurred for over 100 years, and in 1989 the County recognized these activities through the issuance of a Small Winery Exemption (SWE) permit (#SW-178889). A modification to the SWE followed in 1995 (#94180-MOD), and in 1996 the winery was recognized through the approval of a Use Permit (#96095-UP) that encompassed production and custom production, retail sales, visitation, parking, and the construction of a left turn lane from Silverado Trail. This Use Permit, along with two subsequent modifications (#98041-MOD and P08-00159), have been subject to the requirements of the Winery Definition Ordinance. A further modification was approved in 2017 (P17-00129-MOD), which increased tours and tastings and marketing events and recognized changes to the site and floor plan. The currently proposed project, as conditioned, complies with the requirements of the Winery Definition Ordinance and the Napa County Zoning Ordinance (Title 18, Napa County Code) as applicable.

CEQA Exemption Criteria and Analysis:

Article 19 of the State Guidelines for Implementation of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA Guidelines) establishes a list of classes of projects that are categorically exempt from the provisions of CEQA. This project qualifies as an exempt activity under one section of Article 19:

Class 1: Existing Facilities [California Code of Regulations (CCR) §15301]

Class 1 consists of the operation, repair, maintenance, permitting, leasing, licensing, or minor alteration of existing public or private structures, facilities, mechanical equipment, or topographical features. The key consideration is whether the project involves negligible or no expansion of use, and examples include additions to existing structures provided that the addition will not result in an increase of more than 50 percent of the floor area of the structures before the addition, or 2,500 square feet, whichever is less. The project proposal does not include any changes to winery production, tours, tastings, and marketing events allowed through their current entitlement, and therefore the project involves negligible or no expansion of use. The existing 17,751 square feet of winery caves and 6,762 square feet of hospitality structure area make up a total of 24,513 square feet of winery space. The proposed project will result in 20,174 square feet of winery caves and 4,643 square feet of hospitality structure area, for a

total of 24,817 square feet of winery space. This presents a total increase of 304 square feet, or 1.24 percent, and as such can be Categorically Exempt under Class 1: Existing Facilities.

Class 2: Replacement or Reconstruction [California Code of Regulations (CCR) §15302]

Class 2 consists of replacement or reconstruction of existing structures and facilities where the new structure will be located on the same site as the structure replaced and will have substantially the same purpose and capacity as the structure replaced, including but not limited to the replacement of a commercial structure with a new structure of substantially the same size, purpose, and capacity. The proposed project primarily falls within the same footprint as the existing structures and site development, and while a section of the proposed hospitality structure footprint extends north towards the wine cave, it extends onto existing impervious asphalt that can be considered part of the overall site and previously disturbed area. Due to this, the project can be considered Categorically Exempt under Class 2: Replacement or Reconstruction.

Class 3: New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures [California Code of Regulations (CCR) §15303]

Class 3 consists of construction and location of limited numbers of new facilities or structures; installation of small new equipment and facilities in small structures; and the conversion of existing small structures from one use to another where only minor modifications are made in the exterior of the structure. Examples include commercial structures not involving the use of significant amounts of hazardous substances and not exceeding 2,500 square feet. The upgrade to a 296 square-foot high-risk commercial kitchen can be considered new construction under 2,500 square feet and is Categorically Exempt under Class 3: New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures.

Class 4: Minor Alterations to Land [California Code of Regulations (CCR) §15304]

Class 4 consists of minor public or private alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation which do not involve the removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees except for forestry and agricultural purposes. The removal of approximately 10,000 square feet of impervious asphalt surface to create a pervious garden plaza, and the addition of a second cave portal near the proposed crush pad, can be considered a private alteration in the condition of land. A healthy, but not mature and not scenic, oak tree will be removed at the site of the proposed second cave portal and will be replaced at a 2:1 replanting ratio as identified on the submitted site plans. The proposed project as conditioned does not significantly change the existing baseline conditions or trigger exceptions described in CEQA Section 15300.2, as it does not present any potential for cumulative impacts, significant effects, impacts on scenic highways, development on hazardous waste sites, or impacts on historical resources. Therefore, the project can be Categorically Exempt under Class 4: Minor Alterations to Land.

Class 11: Accessory Structures [California Code of Regulations (CCR) §15311]

Class 11 consists of construction, or placement of minor structures accessory to (appurtenant to) existing commercial, industrial, or institutional facilities, including small parking lots. With the removal of approximately 10,000 square feet of impervious asphalt surface, the current parking area will be removed, with a new parking area installed near the existing crush pad. The proposed project as conditioned does not significantly change the existing baseline conditions or trigger exceptions described in CEQA Section 15300.2, as it does not present any potential for cumulative impacts, significant effects, impacts on scenic highways, development on hazardous waste sites, or impacts on

historical resources. This construction and replacement can be Categorically Exempt under Class 11: Accessory Structures.

Conclusion:

The project is Categorically Exempt from CEQA under CCR §15301, §15302, §15303, §15304 and §15311. The project is not located in a particularly sensitive environment. It is adequately distanced from neighboring wells and significant streams so as not to present any cumulative impacts on groundwater aquifers. It will not be making any changes to operations and will have no impacts on noise or traffic, and there are not any unusual circumstances that would cause any other significant effect. The proposed project will not result in damage to scenic resources, including but not limited to, trees, historic buildings, rock outcroppings, or similar resources, within a highway officially designated as a state scenic highway. The project parcel has not been identified as a hazardous waste site, and the project will not cause substantial adverse change in the significance of a historic resource.