
POINT REYES LIGHT

Beleaguered Lagunitas tea seller given three months to vacate property

By Ike Allen

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Marin County is a step closer to winning its long legal battle with a Lagunitas tea seller whose property is filled with experimental, unpermitted structures. Last month, a judge ordered David Lee Hoffman to vacate and turn over possession of the property called the Last Resort, where Mr. Hoffman has lived for almost half a century, within 90 days.

Presiding over a tea ceremony with some regulars at his Tea Museum, Mr. Hoffman seemed uncertain, if not especially worried, about the future. He said he doesn't have a clear plan for what to do within the next three months. "I really didn't think it would come to this," he said. "I thought the judge would be creative enough to come up with a better solution."

Mr. Hoffman, who deals in Chinese pu'erh tea, has built almost 40 structures on his property in the Lagunitas hills, including his own blackwater recycling and worm composting systems. He admits that some of his constructions are illegal, but he thinks of them as a model for sustainability. "I wanted to make it so it could never again be sold," he said, "but I wanted to make it so it could continue to be enjoyed after I'm gone."

Mr. Hoffman has been contending with code enforcement penalties and lawyer bills for more than a decade. In 2015, Judge Paul Haakenson put the property under control of a receiver to decide what to do with the unpermitted structures. The following year, Mr. Hoffman opened his tea museum on Sir Francis Drake Boulevard as a way of "winning points with the county" by separating his business from his home. He has spent about a million dollars on legal counsel, by his lawyer's estimation.

Aside from the notice to vacate, Judge Haakenson's May 21 order gave the receiver permission to hire a broker to market the property. Mr. Hoffman's lawyer, Ann Draper, is working pro bono on a plan to appeal the ruling and did not want to jeopardize it by providing details. She and Mr. Hoffman have about a month and a half to file the appeal.

Mr. Hoffman said over the years, county supervisors have given him mixed signals about whether they supported his efforts to hold onto the property. He said Supervisor Dennis Rodoni was "on the fence" about the issue. In an email to the Light, Supervisor Rodoni said, "The County and the Courts have given Mr. Hoffman many years to come up with a plan to resolve the outstanding issues and pay for the back costs and back taxes. He has simply run out of time." He said he's hopeful a nonprofit will buy the property and save Mr. Hoffman's work.

Paul Seaton, the executive director of the nonprofit Lagunitas Project, is trying to raise the roughly \$4.6 million needed to buy and rehabilitate the property. He believes the mounting penalties don't fit Mr. Hoffman's crime.

"Back in the day in the '70s, you could do anything on your property in West Marin," he said. "The joke was, a building permit is a blue tarp. Over the years, all this got lost." The Lagunitas Project has the endorsement of the Marin chapter of the Sierra Club, but Mr. Seaton said he needs to connect with more donors and explore more methods of raising money. If the effort fails, he believes there will be an outcry from the community. "You almost think people will be chaining themselves to the gate here," he said. "There's a lot of supporters."