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Residents Sour on Winery Plan

By Katie Young, Freeman staff

KINGSTON - Several New Paltz residents are protesting Rivendell Winery's plan to move its operation to a property at Albany Post Road and state Route 299, fearing it will damage their quality of life and promote development.

A half-dozen residents spoke against the move Wednesday night at a public hearing on agricultural districts at the Ulster County Office Building.

They submitted a petition signed by 100 people opposed to the move, but Susan Wine and Robert Ransom, the owners of Rivendell Winery, say they are going through with their plans anyway.

The husband and wife want to move from the approximately 30 acres they now lease on Albany Post Road in Gardiner to a 4-acre property they own three miles up the road, near the junction with Route 299.

The couple decided Wednesday morning to cancel a request for the four acres to be included in the county's agricultural district, they said, in an attempt to quell opposition and confusion surrounding the request.

Agricultural districts are designed to protect agricultural productivity and discourage overwhelming development or overly restrictive zoning requirements, but opponents of the winery's move think it is being used as a back-door measure.

"If they get the county's approval to be included in an agricultural district it will be much more difficult for the town to impose any kind of restrictions on that," said Jim Bacon, a former member of the New Paltz Town Board and Planning Board.

"We are not looking for any special short cuts or special treatment," Ransom said.

Speakers were glad Rivendell gave up its pursuit of the agricultural district, but want the adjacent landowner - Valley Management LLC - to drop its request to be included in the agricultural district as well.

Ransom confirmed he and Wine are in the midst of negotiations with Valley Management to lease nine acres, in addition to the four the couple already owns. He said they need town site plan approval to retrofit their current home on the property into a winery, add a porch and provide parking for 30 cars.

"It's a building already there - there's no development," said Ransom, who denied claims that the winery will include a restaurant, deli or parking for 100.

Other speakers worried the move to Route 299 will open up a Pandora's box - paving the way for development along the scenic road. They say the winery is not so much a vineyard as a retail establishment.

"Is this particular four acres a farm or a retail facility with decorative plants?" asked Robert Gabrielli, a former town councilman.

Ransom and Wine say the vineyard will preserve the land from the "McMansions" cropping up and, although they currently buy all their grapes, they said they will grow grapes on five acres after the move.

Rivendell Winery has been in the Hudson Valley for 20 years. Wine and Ransom also own the Vintage New York retail store and tasting rooms in Manhattan.