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Rivendell Winery owner files civil suit Says officials conspired

By Jeremiah Horrigan
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NEW PALTZ — A rancorous zoning battle in the town has erupted in a civil lawsuit, charging the individual members of the ZBA, an Ulster County legislator and an assistant district attorney with conspiracy to deny the owner of a would-be winery her constitutional rights.

The suit, filed last week on behalf of Susan Wine, the owner of the now-bankrupt Rivendell Winery, asks punitive and compensatory damages of \$240 million.

Bob Hughes, a member of the Zoning Board of Appeals named in the suit, dismissed it Thursday, saying "there's never been a conspiracy — it's hard enough getting together as a board."

Assistant District Attorney Kevin Harp, who's identified in the filing as the director of an alleged conspiracy to deny Wine various constitutional rights, said Thursday that his involvement in the matter was as a neighbor, not as a county official.

County Legislator Susan Zimet, who is also a neighbor, said that when the question of the winery's status came before the Legislature, she recused herself from any discussion of the matter.

"I don't quite see why they've included me," she said Thursday.

The Rivendell saga began in 2007 when the winery, then located in Gardiner, decided to move to a 4-acre site on Albany Post Road in New Paltz.

Neighbors complained, arguing the winery was an inappropriate use and citing parking and traffic concerns.

The ZBA ruled the proposed use was "commercial," not "agricultural."

The proposal eventually went before the county Legislature and was the subject of appeals.

All such appeals went against the winery; when Wine and her husband and co-owner, Robert Ransom, filed for Chapter 7, they blamed the town's "anti-business" attitudes.

The town has already spent \$24,000 defending its position, Supervisor Toni Hokanson said.

While denouncing the suit as a "foolish waste of money on their part," Hokanson said she expects the town's insurance to cover further costs.

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