

POINT REYES LIGHT

Hopes for tighter parking rules strain Bolinas effort

By

Anna Guth

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The county is working toward a summer deadline for the implementation of Measure X, which passed in Bolinas by a 52-percent majority last fall to regulate the overnight parking of oversized vehicles on several downtown streets. This month, however, the residents who wished the measure's language had been stronger continued to lobby for stricter rules, an effort Supervisor Dennis Rodoni cautioned was counterproductive.

Measure X—which the Bolinas Community Public Utility District drafted in collaboration with Supervisor Rodoni last year—directed the county to enact a resolution to “include Brighton Avenue, Park Avenue and Wharf Road in downtown Bolinas as county roads on which there shall be no overnight parking of vehicles, except for automobiles, motorcycles and pickups” between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m.

Since it was an advisory measure, the county had to initiate its own process of codifying the rule after the November vote. As part of that effort, the Marin County Sheriff's Office flagged a sticking point in the language: although there is a definition for motorcycle and pickups in the state's vehicle code, automobiles are undefined, leaving a gray area for enforcement.

Specific size parameters are necessary, deputies pointed out, in order for them to distinguish between the cars that are permissible for overnight parking under the measure and the oversized vehicles the measure intends to regulate—those that often take up more than one parking spot, often providing long-term housing or storage for their owners.

To resolve this, the Board of Supervisors considered an ordinance on April 9 that proposed to define the length of automobiles.

“County staff has conducted a review of the length dimensions for automobiles and found that private automobiles serving up to six passengers typically do not exceed 22 feet in length,” a staff report stated. “The provision of an automobile definition that limits the length of the vehicle will assist the Sheriff with enforcement and provide consistent expectations for the public.”

The recommended maximum length of 22 feet also corresponds to the definition of an “oversized, commercial vehicle” in the county's code: a vehicle that has a commercial license plate and exceeds 22 feet bumper to bumper, including any attached trailers or auxiliary equipment.

Yet during the April 9 hearing, a group of Bolinas residents shot down the ordinance, arguing for tighter length and height limitations. Twenty-two feet was far too long, they argued, to stem the problem of people camping in their cars.

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They recommended a shorter limit—19 feet, or perhaps 17—that would limit a larger range of vehicles. Others suggested an additional limit: a height restriction of seven feet, in addition to the 22-foot length limit, which would exclude another set of larger vehicles.

Supervisors found themselves somewhat flummoxed, being under the impression that the resolution was solving a problem for which Bolinas residents had asked for help in the first place.

Supervisor Rodoni attended last Wednesday's BCPUD meeting to explain the county's process, reminding community members of its limitations.

Measure X is linked to a county enabling ordinance passed in 2017 that includes a menu of options for parking regulations that can be tailored street by street.

Working within this established countywide framework—rather than creating a new, Bolinas-specific ordinance—simplifies the process and shortens the timeline for implementation; it also helps ensure that the regulations are legal and enforceable, easing the burden on deputies.

Residents who assisted the BCPUD in drafting the measure agreed last year that the problems with long-term vehicle storage and habitation were dire enough to push forward with this faster option, even if it wasn't perfect; further regulations could be explored later.

But not everyone felt that way.

“Twenty-two feet is as long as this room or more,” Al Minvielle, a longtime Brighton Avenue resident, said last week, gesturing to the far wall in the packed BCPUD office. “It's the largest possible vehicle you can buy that isn't a bus, and some are buses. We have a campground downtown, and this isn't going to change that.”

Back when Measure X was still in the works, Mr. Minvielle had petitioned for a new definition for pickups that excluded those with a camper shell, as he said those were a large part of the problem. (Pickups with removable campers are allowed under the measure, as long as they meet the state vehicle code's fairly inclusive limit of a nine-foot bed and don't have a trailer attached.)

Supervisor Rodoni reminded the room that Marin has permitted people to sleep in their cars since a Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals decision in 2014 that signaled greater tolerance statewide. Furthermore, any move to restrict access to the beach will irk the California Coastal Commission, which has to sign off on any new parking rule in town.

But some attendees pushed back on the supervisor: West Marin struggles with some enforcement mechanisms to address long-term parking that are common statewide. There are just two deputies who patrol West Marin at a given time; Lieutenant Jim Hickey has said that fact makes it nearly impossible to enforce the state's 72-hour-rule that requires vehicles parked on public streets to move after three days. Towing companies are also reluctant to serve the remote area.

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Supervisor Rodoni acknowledged those handicaps, but said he could not promise the county would remedy them in the near future; instead, he said it was important to focus on what the sheriff's office can easily enforce. Ultimately, he proposed pressing forward with Measure X without a definition of automobile, leaving it up to the discretion of the Sheriff's Office.

Most residents in the room and the BCPUD board indicated support for that idea.

"I am for getting something done," said Anna Gade, a longtime resident. "Personally, I went downtown today, and most of them are campers or vans: they are not automobiles, motorcycles or pickups. This language would eliminate the majority of the vehicles that are down there."

After the county obtains a coastal permit, Measure X will likely come before the board later this spring, after which there would be a 30-day period before the signs go up.