

## A Rustic Paradise, Open for Development

Por Redacción

GUADALUPE VALLEY, Mexico — The doors were locked. The lights were out. When Hugo D'Acosta and 60 of his neighbors reached Ensenada City Hall after being tipped off to a nighttime vote that would open their beloved wine region to Florida-style housing and golf courses, they had to shout just to get in.

But it was no use: In a fourth-floor meeting room, lawmakers quickly voted to permit urban and suburban development in the agricultural heart of northwestern Mexico, the Guadalupe Valley, despite angry opposition from those who have spent decades making it an international destination for wine, food and quiet.

"It will destroy everything," said Mr. D'Acosta, 55, one of the valley's premier winemakers. "We can put up plastic grapes to make it look pretty, but that's it."

Municipal council members argue that the new zoning regulations will preserve the valley and increase property values, spreading out the benefits of a boom. But the new rules subvert the state-approved regional plan they were supposed to clarify by allowing up to 10 times as much housing density while significantly weakening public oversight. Independent scientists say the arid valley simply cannot sustain the intensified development, creating what many here see as a threat to a national treasure and a vital test of Mexico's young democracy.

The Guadalupe Valley is Mexico's Tuscany. The vast majority of Mexico's increasingly popular wine comes from vineyards here, along a narrow, 14-mile stretch of land with the warm days and cold nights that vintners crave. Over the past five years, as interest in the area has grown, dozens of new wineries, along with small hotels and award-winning restaurants, have popped up between the softly sloping mountains. Yet, for now at least, it is still much as it has always been: a ribbon of rustic beauty where most



Max Whittaker for The New York Times  
Natalia Badán, a winery owner and longtime resident of the Guadalupe Valley, called a zoning change "an aggression."

of the roads are dirt and the nights are brightened by shimmering stars.

Critics say the new rules, which apply to the entire wine region north of the city of Ensenada, could destroy all that. And it could happen quickly. Carlos Lagos, a major developer with close financial and personal ties to Ensenada officials, has already published plans for a 996-acre development, Rancho Olivares, which includes a nine-hole golf course, a spa, pools and more than 400 new homes.

Mr. D'Acosta and many others believe they are up against a familiar brand of Mexican corruption,



Land is for sale in the area, though scientists say the arid valley cannot sustain intensified development.

especially with the local government again controlled by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which led (and pilfered) Mexico for 71 years.

This time, though, a savvy resistance coalition has begun to emerge. On Monday, a little over a week after winemakers canceled the popular harvest festival in protest, about 300 supporters marched to City Hall. On

Tuesday, at a public forum in a cramped university conference room in Ensenada, state officials, scientists and the municipality's own planning experts all criticized the new rules.

"The valley should continue to be what it is now, an agricultural area, for wine and food and beautiful scenery," said Javier Sandoval, director of urban planning at the Municipal Institute of Investigation and Planning, which advises the local government on development.

After comparing the new regulations with the regional program, he said the vote amounted to a breakdown in land management and procedure. "Technical expertise has been de-linked from government decisions," he said.

Many longtime residents and new arrivals favor growth on a small scale. R. P. McCabe, an American novelist building a winery on a patch of hillside across from where Rancho Olivares would be, said he started coming here years ago because it reminded him of the Napa Valley of his youth — family-oriented, friendly. "I don't want to see something rural, traditional and historic be taken away," he said.

His neighbors to the north, Hector Perez, 40, who is building a winery, and south, Natalia Badán, 60, who grew up on a 12-acre farm that now produces wine and organic produce, said the Lagos development would hurt the entire valley. Ms. Badán called the new zoning decision “an aggression.”

“It’s opportunism,” she said. “They changed the rules in a dirty, disagreeable way to favor development that has nothing to do with what we’ve been working on.”

Mr. Lagos’s office did not respond to emails seeking comment.

The regulations were supposed to be the final step of an 18-year process that involved scientific studies, public hearings and a published program for growth that prioritized agriculture and sustainability. Many features of the plan were innovative — it required that homes not be built in a straight line, for example — and a wide range of stakeholders were to be involved in major decisions.

Now, many of those groups, including an pro-winery association, have been cut from the process, according to Mr. Sandoval. The new rules also eliminate requirements for impact studies and legalize anything already built, and possibly anything built up to 360 days after the regulations are published, creating what Mr. D’Acosta described as an amnesty for anything-goes construction.

“It’s like inviting Mickey Mouse to the countryside,” he said, allowing Disney-style artifice to crowd out the authentic.

But the increase in density is the primary concern. “Urban development here will be fatal for the wine industry, completely fatal,” said Raúl Canino Herrera, a water treatment expert at the Autonomous University of Baja California.

It is not just a matter of limited water supply, he said; in the small towns here where most farm workers live, water flows only a few hours a day, often at a trickle. It is also a matter of quality. “Everything you use at home — detergents, chemicals — ends up in the water,” he said. “How are they going to make sure it stays clean?”



The New York Times



Raymundo de la Mora, a municipal council member, voted for new zoning rules, which he says guarantee organized growth.

Raymundo de la Mora, a council member who voted for the new rules, said that water accessibility would still be taken into account, suggesting that water could be brought in. He did not deny that some officials would benefit from opening the area to more development, through property holdings or connections to developers, but he said poor landowners would be the main beneficiaries because the new regulations clarify what can be built. “We

have given everyone certainty,” he said, adding that the regulations would preserve the valley’s beauty by codifying its growth.

“Until now, we didn’t have regulations that guaranteed organized growth and, above all, that conserve the Guadalupe Valley as part of the heritage of all Mexicans,” he said. “That is our priority.”

Some poorer residents said that if welcoming development would mean more jobs, they were for it. Others, like Clemente Rodriguez, 58, a sod farmer watering his grass on Wednesday morning, said subdivisions like the one planned by Mr. Lagos probably would not be as bad as critics feared.

“The people complaining aren’t even from here,” he said. “They’re from France, England or wherever.”

But many of his Mexican neighbors said they expected the worst. The website for Rancho Olivares proclaims that it will be what critics fear: “a catalyst for unprecedented change.” And like Mr. D’Acosta and Ms. Badán, many residents of all ages and classes said they worried that Mr. Lagos and others with money and connections would trample anyone whose needs did not align with their vision of a more crowded, real-estate-driven valley.



By Damien Cave  
Raymundo de la Mora, a member of the Ensenada City Council who leads the commission for governing and legislation, defends the vote to increase development in the Guadalupe Valley.

“This is the reality,” said Jose Ramirez, 79, a retired farmer. “If you’re powerful and you come here and there is only one glass of water, you’re going to get it, and I’ll get nothing.”