



COUNTY OF HUMBOLDT

For the meeting of: 10/28/2025

File #: 25-1260

To: Board of Supervisors

From: Planning and Building Department

Agenda Section: Public Hearing

Vote Requirement: Majority

SUBJECT:

An Appeal of the Planning Commission's Approval of a Conditional Use Permit Modification to an Event Venue (PLN-2024-18885) to Allow up to 14 Guests to Stay Overnight in the Existing Residence for up to Three Days and to Increase the Maximum Number of Events from 30 to 40 Events Per Year with the Maximum Number of Guests Increased from 120 up to 150 per Event.

RECOMMENDATION(S):

That the Board of Supervisors:

1. Open the public hearing, receive, and consider the staff report, and accept public comment; and
2. Close the public hearing; and
3. Adopt the resolution (Attachment 1) which does the following:
 - a. Finds the project is exempt from environmental review pursuant to State CEQA Guidelines Sections 15301 (existing facilities) and 15304 (minor alterations to land); and
 - b. Denies the appeal filed by Kenneth Stumpf; and
 - c. Approves the Ridgefield Events Conditional Use Permit Modification subject to the conditions of approval (Attachment 1A).

STRATEGIC PLAN:

This action supports the following areas of your Board's Strategic Plan.

Area of Focus: Core Services/Other

Strategic Plan Category: 9999 - Core Services/Other

DISCUSSION:

This is an appeal of the Humboldt County Planning Commission's Sept. 4, 2025, approval of a Modification to Conditional Use Permit PLN-2024-18885 (the project). The project was approved by a 4-0 vote. The applicant is seeking a Modification to the originally approved Conditional Use Permit PLN-18885-CUP to authorize the use of the onsite residence to allow up to 14 guests to stay at the venue for anywhere from one to three days. The modification also requests an increase in the number of guests at any single event of up to 150 people and a total of 40 events each year. The original permit was approved for special events (primarily weddings) between April to October in the Fickle Hill area. The 79-acre parcel is zoned Timberland Production Zone (TPZ) and is developed with a single-family residence. There is an outdoor terrace area in the northwest corner of the site, which is where all events are centered.

The original Conditional Use Permit (PLN-18885), approved by the Humboldt County Planning Commission on April 4, 2024, allows the special events venue to operate from mid-April to mid-October with events occurring Monday - Sunday, with a maximum of 30 events annually. The special events, which are primarily weddings, currently include up to 120 guests. The hours of operation are

from 9:30 am to no later than 9:30 pm with guests on site generally between 1:00 pm to no later than 9:30 pm.

The site receives electrical power from PG&E which will be utilized to power the existing residence onsite, as well as onsite lighting and venue accessories. The subject parcel is served by a small water system, a groundwater well and two (2) On-site Wastewater Treatment Systems (OWTS). The applicant recently had a new commercial septic system installed that is designed to accommodate 150 guests at the property, as well as ADA restrooms (BLD-2024-60661 and EH-SEPTPO-25-000007). Drinking water associated with the special events is provided by bottled water.

The modification would allow for up to 14 guests to stay at the venue for 24 hours a day for up to 3 days. Up to 12 overnight guests would utilize the Main House and another two guests would utilize the smaller unit which is identified as the Wild Iris Suite. Parking for the overnight guests would remain in the onsite designated area as previously approved under PLN-2024-18885. Finally, quiet hours would be enforced by management between 9:30pm and 8am.

The allowance for up to 14 guests to stay at the venue for anywhere from one to three days has the potential to reduce the number of weddings from up to three wedding events on a weekend to only one. According to the applicant this could reduce the amount of traffic and noise from 50%-70% (Attachment 5, permit holder's letter to neighboring property owners dated March 19, 2025). While the allowance for overnight events would allow for a potential reduction in events per weekend, the modification would allow for up to 25% more events to occur per year. This change is primarily to allow the business to have flexibility in how they operate. If every event included overnight stays it is unlikely that the maximum number of events would occur in that year. The modification to allow an additional number of guests, from 120 to 150, would also provide for additional flexibility for the business. Both the Department of Public Works and the Division of Environmental Health have indicated that the change in number of events and maximum number of people raise no additional concerns.

Access to the subject parcel is from Fickle Hill Road, which is a paved, County-maintained Road without pedestrian facilities. Conditions of approval of the permit required the applicant to improve the driveway apron at Fickle Hill to commercial standards, ensure visibility at the driveway meets County standards, obtain an encroachment permit for this work, apply for and obtain an annual permit from the Public Works Land Use office and to provide temporary traffic control during each event as well as to provide additional insurance to the County. Since approval of the permit the County has received no complaints related to traffic.

Concerns surrounding the original project's approval generally related to noise and traffic. The venue site is surrounded on two sides by timberland. The closest residence to the west is approximately 300 feet away and there are three other residences to the west that are between 565 and 800 feet from the venue location. To the south there are two residences approximately 1200 feet away. The conditions of approval included restrictions on event-related noise requiring that speakers be directed inward and away from the nearest property lines to the west. Prior to the notification of the proposed Modification, the County had received no complaints related to noise. However, since notifications were sent Aug. 7, 2025, more than 20 comments and complaints have been received opposing the project.

In April of 2025 concerns from the public were raised that the Ridgefield Events website was advertising the event facility as offering overnight lodging and special events with a capacity for up to 300 people, both of which were not consistent with the approved permit. Upon contacting the operator, it was explained that the website was based on an out-of-date business plan which had not been updated to reflect what had been approved in 2024. As of Sept. 23, 2025, the Ridge Field Events website was advertising lodging accommodations of up to fourteen guests and tabling up to 150 guests. Per the applicant this is because they are booking out up to a year or more in advance and are anticipating approval of the modification.

On March 19, 2025, the permit holder sent a Good Neighbor Letter to the surrounding residences regarding the intention of modifying the current permit (Attachment 5). On Aug. 7, 2025, a Public Notice was sent to parcels in the surrounding 300-foot radius of the subject parcel. Since that date, the Planning Department has received several comments from local residents.

Public Comments for Modification: The purpose of the Public Notice was to inform the neighborhood of the pending modification to the Conditional Use Permit and provide an opportunity for the public to comment on the application prior to the hearing. As of the Planning Commission Hearing on Sept. 5, 2025, eighteen letters/emails had been received *opposing* the approval of the modification while one letter *approved* of the change to the Conditional Use Permit (Attachment 2B).

Several comments of opposition referenced the loud music and noise produced by the events. Other concerns centered around

water use, traffic, fire risk, wastewater and alcohol use. Many of the concerns described were identified during staff analysis of the originally approved project. These concerns were to be mitigated by the Conditions of Approval for the original project, but commenters state that these conditions did not alleviate their concerns. The one letter of support which was provided by the applicant which he received regarding the "Good Neighbor Letter" expressed the noise was not at loud volume from their property and event traffic had not impacted them (included in Attachment 2B). This resident resides approximately 1450 feet from the venue location.

After significant public testimony and discussion, the Planning Commission voted 4-0 to approve the modification with the following conditions:

- 1) The total number of events would be limited to a total of forty, but there shall be no more than 30 events with amplified music and/or speech.
- 2) Weekend packages/overnight stays shall include only a single day with amplified music or speech.
- 3) For overnight stays the short-term rental noise standards shall apply during the evening hours.
- 4) Guests are limited to 150 per event.
- 5) Applicant shall provide contact information to everyone who has commented at the hearing of Sept. 4th, 2025, or otherwise provided comments.

Appeal

On Sept. 15, 2025, an appeal was filed by Kenneth Stumpf who resides on Fickle Hill Road and who's property is directly south of the event venue. The appeal was also on the behalf of eight other residents with properties within 1000 feet of the event venue. Mr. Stumpf cited procedural concerns, environmental impacts, and public safety issues as the primary reasons for the appeal.

Procedural Concerns

The appellant argues that while the public is limited to three minutes for public comment the applicant was given more time to rebut those who opposed the modifications concerns. It was noted in the appeal letter the applicant was given approximately four minutes and nine seconds of time for remarks concerning public comment. Per the *Humboldt County Planning Commission Rules, Code of Conduct and Ethics* guidelines (2022) the Procedure for the Conduct of Public Hearings Part G (g) states that "the applicant or his or her representative may then take three minutes, or such other time limited or extended in the discretion of the Chair, to respond to previous testimony or questions from the Commission." The Planning Commission followed the procedures that are established in the adopted Planning Commission Guidelines.

A second concern noted by the appellant was what he perceived as a lack of preparation by the Commissioners. It was stated prior that the final vote for appeal was 4-0. On September 4th, three Commissioners were absent from the hearing (Levy, McFarlane, and West). Of the four present, two were late due to illness or other scheduling requirements. Despite the tardy start to the meeting, the commissioners received all required materials from the Planning Department staff by 5pm on the Friday prior to the hearing in order to prepare. Again, the *Humboldt County Planning Commission Rules, Code of Conduct and Ethics* guidelines require Commissioners to uphold *Principals and Standards* including to "Act in the Public Interest", "Comply with the Law", "Respect the Process", and make all "Decisions Based on Merit" ((a, b, d, e) pg14). There is no indication that these guidelines were not followed.

Finally, Mr. Stumpf felt, as did several other commenters, that the hearing should have been continued. One argument made was that a Public Records Request to the California Highway Patrol detailing recent traffic stops or accidents along Fickle Hill Road that involved impaired driving requested by Mr. Stumpf has not been fulfilled by State. Furthermore, several residents stated that they had not received a "Notice of Hearing" from the County and were unaware of the Modification to the permit.

A "Notice of Public Hearing" was proved at least 10 working days prior to the hearing to all property owners, as indicated on the Assessor's current Secured records, and residents, based on registered addresses in the Department, within three hundred (300) feet of the perimeter of the parcel on which the development is proposed as required under Public Notice Procedures 312.8.1.1 and 312.8.2.2 of the Humboldt County Code. Moreover a "Notice of Public Hearing" as required by Section 65091 of the California Government Code and Humboldt County Code 312.8.3.1, was published in the Times Standard on Sept. 20th, 2025, 10 working days prior to the hearing.

The Planning Commission could have requested a “continuance” under Section K of the “Procedures for Conduct of Public Hearings” in the *Humboldt County Planning Commission Rules, Code of Conduct and Ethics* guidelines which allows for a “continuance of the hearing at any time during the proceedings. Prior to final action to continue, the Chair will determine if those present prefer to present their testimony during the hearing or delay to the date of continuance. Continuance may include a field trip.” The Planning Commission did not believe the additional information from the Highway Patrol would be definitive in the manner sought by the neighbors and the other procedure were followed and chose not to continue the item.

Potential Detrimental Impacts Raised by the Appeal

The appellant argues that the following detrimental impacts were never questions or discussed during the hearing.

Public Safety

As noted previously, concerns have been raised by the appellant that the number of events and guests will increase traffic and will elevate risks of impaired driving along Fickle Hill Road. The Appellant has requested information from the California Highway Patrol and Arcata Police in order to obtain data on under-the-influence arrests, incidents, and accidents in the area. To date no such information has been submitted to the Planning and Building Department and there is no evidence suggesting the special event venue has resulted in traffic safety issues or an increase in under-the-influence drivers. As required by the original Conditional Use Permit, the Humboldt County Public Works Land Use Department required the applicant to provide temporary traffic control during events and maintain sight visibility for all driveways associated for the event. The permit holder also stated during the Planning Commission Hearing on September 4th, any driver is allowed to leave their vehicle on the property overnight and retrieve it the next day, if there is concern that unsafe operation of a motor vehicle may occur. Lastly, the overnights stays have the potential to reduce traffic associated with the events as the specific guests and/or wedding parties would not be required to travel to and from the event venue and any separate lodging.

Environmental and Infrastructure Concerns

Water Use

The appellant argues that there are potential detrimental impacts on the local water table due to the increase in events, number of guests, and overnight stays. The residence has a developed well that is adequate to meet the demands of guests utilizing the system during the overnight stays per the Humboldt County Division of Environmental Health. Up to 14 overnight guests on occasion would not be a substantial increase in the use of the well compared to typical residential purposes. For the events themselves, no onsite food preparation is proposed by this permit. Newly developed ADA restrooms will also utilize the current well, which is estimated to require no more than 750 gallons per 150-person event for septic purposes. Even if all 40 special events occur at 150 guests, this would be 30,000 gallons from the well used per year for the events (not counting the overnight stays). For context, a typical residence utilized approximately 150,000 gallons of water per year. All food preparation is performed offsite through appropriate catering services. Beverages for events, including water, will be brought to the site by the caterers. Used dishes will be collected and washed off-site. Portable toilets with handwashing stations will be provided for each event and on-site parking will be made available in an area of mowed grass/pasture with a secondary overflow parking area designated onsite.

Septic

The appellant states his concern regarding impacts to local water quality due to increased human waste/effluent that is no longer collected in portable toilets and removed from the property and instead is not proposed to be processed on-site in a new on-site wastewater treatment system (OWTS). The Division of Environmental Health has approved the design and issued a permit for the new OWTS system, documenting that it meets all requirements necessary to ensure no adverse impacts to local water quality.

Fire Risk

Due to potential increase in the number of guests at any given event, the appellant is concerned regarding increased risk for fire. The subject parcel is located within an area of high fire hazard severity. The parcel is located within the State Responsibility Area (SRA) and within the Arcata Fire Protection District (Arcata FPD). According to the Operations Plan, there is a fire-truck turnaround space on the subject parcel and there is 30,000-gallons of water storage. The Arcata FPD received a project referral and recommended approval of the original project. A referral response was not received from the Arcata Fire Protection District or CALFire for the Modification. Further the operators are on-site during all events to ensure that the events are managed appropriately and to address emergency situations should they arise.

Noise and Property Values

The appellant argues that the detrimental impacts to property values due to excessive noise from amplified sound was not discussed during the hearing. While property values were not considered, the impact of noise, including amplified sources, during the events was discussed during both the original Conditional Use Permit hearing and during the modification hearing. In the original permit the Commission deliberated on a decibel level appropriate to address neighbor concerns and decided that a maximum of 80 decibels at the property line was the maximum allowed. This was set as a condition of approval.

During the original approval, a condition was added to require the applicant to monitor the noise levels if two or more complaints concerning noise was received by the Planning Department. Prior to submittal of the Modification application, no noise complaints had been received by the Planning Department. Independently, the applicant had been monitoring noise during events. Since the notification and the September 4th hearing, the Department has received five (5) noise complaints from events held on September 6th, September 13th, September 19th and 20th. The applicant has been notified of these complaints.

The permit holder provided decibel readings from events between May 25th and August 30th of 2025 that showed readings taken inside the property line and close to the events space, no decibel levels exceeded 74 decibels at the locations taken. The increase in number of events is not expected to increase noise impacts as the ten additional events allowed under the modification are prohibited from utilizing amplified sources of noise, and an increase in guests from 120 to 150 is not expected to increase noise impacts as the noise concerns are primarily related to amplified sound and not to the activities of guests.

During the Modification hearing, community members who own properties adjacent to the events locations were concerned that the Conditional Use Permit and possible Modification could impact the values of their properties as per the Real Estate Transfer Disclosure Statement, sellers are required to notify potential buyers of known "Neighborhood noise problems or other nuisances" under Section 1102 of the California Civil Code. This concern was not discussed by the Planning Commission and is not a relevant finding for approval of a Conditional Use Permit.

Summary and Recommendation

The Modification to the Conditional Use Permit is in conformance with all applicable policies and standards in the Humboldt County General Plan 2017. The rental of space for weddings and similar special events is a use that is supplemental and temporary within a land designation zone of Timberland and Residential Estates. A Conditional Use Permit (CUP) was obtained as required for special events in accordance with §314-62.1 *Special Events and Attractions* and all required Conditions of Approval have been met by the Permit Holder. The primary concerns raised from the appellants appear to be from the existing Conditional Use Permit, for which the operator has been primarily in compliance with all conditions and operational restrictions. This application is not a reconsideration of the issued Use Permit and is only a consideration for the requested modification. The addition of overnight stays, an additional ten non-amplified events, and an increase in 30 guests per event is not expected to create any significant impacts. Planning staff recommends that your Board deny the appeal and approve the Conditional Use Permit Modification, subject to the recommended conditions of approval.

SOURCE OF FUNDING:

General Fund

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

The Appellant has paid the fee associated with filing this appeal. If the cost of the appeal exceeds the appeal fee the remainder of the cost is funded by the General Fund Contribution to the Planning and Building Department (1100277). At this time, the amount of work has not exceeded the fee.

STAFFING IMPACT:

All work was completed in a timely manner with respect to the expectation of a quick resolution for the modification. All resources required were provided by the Planning and Building Department.

OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT:

The project was referred to responsible agencies and all responding agencies have either responded with no comment or recommended approval or conditional approval. The Department of Environmental Health has provided detailed information regarding the completed onsite wastewater treatment system. (Attachment 4).

ALTERNATIVES TO STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Board could choose to approve the appeal and reverse the approval of the modification. In such as case, the original Conditional Use Permit would stay in affect.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Draft Resolution
 - A. Conditions of Approval
 - B. Operations Plan
 - C. Additional Revised Operations Plan
 - D. Site Plan
2. Modification Staff Report PLN-18885-MOD01
 - A. Planning Commission Resolution PLN-18885-MOD01
 - B. Ridgefield Events Environmental Noise Study 04.01.2024
 - C. Department of Environmental Health approved OWTS
 - D. Referral Agency Comments and Recommendations
 - E. Dear Ridgefield Neighbor Letter
3. Attachment 3 - 18885-MOD01 Appeal Letter
4. Public Comment

PREVIOUS ACTION/REFERRAL:

Meeting of: 09/04/2025

File No.: 25-1080