

UKIAH PLANNING COMMISSION

Wool mill operation approved

Owner hopes to be processing wool by fall

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The Ukiah Planning Commission Wednesday unanimously approved the permits requested by a man hoping to operate a wool mill and food truck on South Orchard Avenue.

“This is (Matthew Gilbert’s)

lifelong dream, so it’s time to get this project off the ground,” said John Harper, the Livestock & Natural Resources Advisor for the University of California’s Cooperative Extension in Mendocino County, explaining that he brainstormed the idea with Gilbert several years ago, knowing that having someone able to process wool locally would ben-

efit many sheep raisers in Mendocino, Sonoma, Lake and Marin counties who currently pay high prices to ship out their wool.

“I talked to a lot of people in Sonoma County who would like to see this project go forward,” said Planning Commissioner Mark Hilliker, adding that he was concerned about noise emanating from the processing machines, especially since Gilbert’s

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Matthew Gilbert stands in front of his wool-processing equipment at his home on South Orchard Avenue.

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property across from the post office on South Orchard Avenue is right behind a mobile home park on East Gobbi Street.

Gilbert requested to be able to start the mill at 5 a.m., and Commission Chairman Mike Whetzel said he didn't mind having it start that early, since "trucks start running into the post office at about that time."

Harper told the commission that noise should not be an issue, predicting that it will be "largely contained within the building, plus, the wool around it will act as a noise insulator."

Several people spoke in strong support of Gilbert and his plan, including Peggy Agnew, who said she has been raising sheep for 30 years in Potter Valley, and that finding places to send her wool has always been an expensive challenge, since she often is sending it out of state.

Another component of Gilbert's request included a permit for a food truck, which he said will help supplement the family's income for the first couple of years.

"It will likely be about

two-and-a-half years before the mill is self-sustaining," he said, explaining that he and others have invested about \$100,000 in equipment already, and he still needs to complete an expansion of his garage before beginning to process wool in earnest.

"You really need the proper amount of space to do it efficiently," said Gilbert, explaining that he and his wife, Sarah, bought the property at 676 S. Orchard Ave. with the intent of operating a mill there, and were relieved Wednesday when the Planning Commission approved the requested permits, for both the mill and the food truck, unanimously.

Gilbert will not operate the food truck himself, but will allow different food truck operators to drive in and leave each day, offering a convenient food stop for nearby businesses and income for him.

Gilbert said if all goes well, including the fundraising for his construction plans, he should be processing wool by the end of September.

"With the amount of persistence he's had pursuing his dream so far, I have full faith he'll be up and running," Agnew said of Gilbert.