

## Road less traveled by made difference

### A SENSE OF PLACE » The Sonoma Valley Freeway that never came to be, and what it meant

By

**ARTHUR DAWSON**

FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

The Sonoma Valley Freeway doesn't exist. But back in the 1960s, when the state began making plans to turn Highway 12 into a "highspeed, limited-access road," it was virtually a done deal. By 1964 it existed not only in the imaginations of engineers, but also on paper.

You can still find the plans at the Glen Oaks Ranch archive in Glen Ellen. Printed on long, narrow sheets several feet long, they're labeled "FREEWAY in Sonoma County between Kenwood and Highway 8 (New)." Highway 8, which also doesn't exist, would have connected Highway 37 to Petaluma via lower Sonoma Valley. There would have been a "freeway to freeway interchange" south of Watmaugh Road where a vineyard sits today.

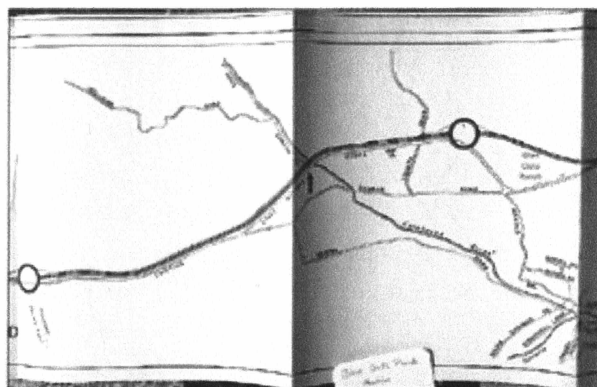
The Sonoma Valley Freeway would have run west of Sonoma and right through the heart of El Verano, elevated like 101 through downtown Santa Rosa. Interchanges were planned at Petaluma Road, Boyes Boulevard, Madrone Road, Trinity Road and elsewhere. There would have been a Glen Ellen off-ramp. If all that had come to pass, imagine how much more densely developed the valley would be today.

So, what happened?

Prominent citizens, like Roswell Cochran, got organized and petitioned the state to take it off the books. It sounded impossible — the 1960s marked the apex of highway construction. Canceling a freeway was unheard

of. But Cochran treasured the rural nature of his Glen Oaks Ranch and Sonoma Valley and the freeway would have run through his backyard, just behind his home.

He and others persisted, and public pressure eventually shelved the project. Designated Scenic Highways, which Highway 12 became, also came into being in the 1960s. The



**The proposed and ultimately unrealized freeway plan for the Glen Ellen area in 1964, Glen Oaks Ranch location in blue. COURTESY SONOMA LAND TRUST**

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**FREEWAY**

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Instead of a freeway, we have the natural and agricultural beauty of the Wine Country. All are a legacy of citizens speaking up. We still have time to

Legislature recognized that such roads “play an important role in encouraging the growth of the recreation and tourist industries.” It was a remarkably prophetic statement, considering that in 1970, the California Wine County was not even a “thing.” But by the end of that decade, the idea was catching on.

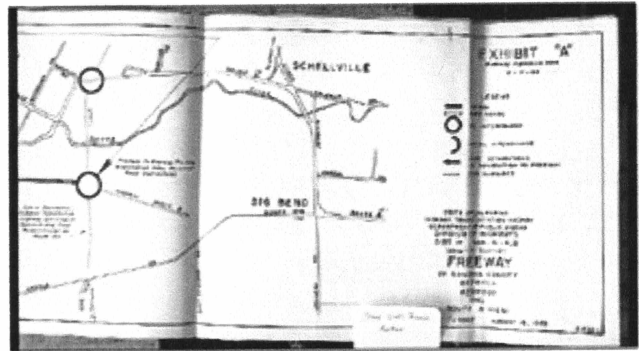
Tourism is now our economic engine.

The Sonoma Creek Flood Control Project, proposed by the Army Corps of Engineers in the 1950s, didn’t happen either. It would have diverted miles of Sonoma Creek into a trapezoidal concrete channel to the bay. Local trout fishermen, and others, halted that idea, too. More recently, a large hotel was planned for city property above Sonoma. Citizens protested and put it on the ballot, where it was rejected by an overwhelming majority.

These stories are hopeful guides as we seek a way forward with the specific plan for the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) site in Glen Ellen. The Kenwood Press described citizens’ reactions to the proposed alternatives as “dismayed,” “angered” and “terrified” at the prospect of doubling the size of this small community.

History suggests that such moments are also opportunities. Today, instead of a concrete channel, we have a living stream. Instead of a hotel, we have the Montini Preserve.

speaking up for SDC, but it’s running short. The Supervisors are scheduled to decide in January. If you’d like more information, please visit [eldridgeforall.org](http://eldridgeforall.org) Silicon Valley is no longer known as “The Valley of Heart’s Delight.” But many still think of Sonoma Valley that way.



**Freeway plan for southern Sonoma Valley, 1964.**  
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