

Community groups file lawsuit challenging Sonoma Developmental Center redevelopment EIR

By Melissa Dowling

Calling it “a short-sighted plan with serious environmental consequences” in a recent press release, two community advocacy organizations have filed suit requesting Sonoma County revise the environmental impact report (EIR) for the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) Specific Plan and scale back proposed redevelopment of the former SDC campus.

The goal of the lawsuit, according to the press release, is to require the county to revise the EIR to address critical environmental issues and provide accurate analyses for appropriate mitigations. The current EIR is incomplete and deeply flawed, according to the plaintiffs.

The advocacy coalitions, Sonoma County Tomorrow, Inc. and Sonoma Community Advocates for a Liveable Environment (SCALE), contend that the EIR for redevelopment of the 180-acre SDC campus violates the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) on a number of issues. The EIR, which allows construction of up to 1,000 homes, 400,000 square feet of commercial space, and a resort hotel in the middle of rural Sonoma Valley, must be scaled back to bring it into compliance with environmental law.

In an email correspondence with the *Kenwood Press* about the lawsuit, Permit Sonoma Policy Manager Bradley Dunn stated, “Permit Sonoma did extensive analysis and takes our obligations under CEQA seriously.”

Although not in the scope of the lawsuit, the number of units in the EIR, which was approved by the

Sonoma County Board of Supervisors at the end of a nearly nine-hour meeting on Dec. 16, is out of balance with the up to 750 homes included in the SDC Specific Plan for the site approved by the supervisors in the same meeting.

“This intensity of development is completely out of scale with the rural community that surrounds the site and, because of the high wildfire risk, could endanger the lives of thousands of current and future residents of Sonoma Valley,” said SCALE spokesperson Tracy Salcedo. Portions of the SDC campus, as well as the surrounding village of Glen Ellen, were devastated by the Nuns Fire in 2017, when residents struggled to navigate backed-up one-lane roads trying to evacuate.

The EIR’s wildfire evacuation analysis found that adding 2,400 residents and about 1,000 workers on the site would have virtually no impact on evacuation travel time. “This analysis defies the real-world experience of Sonoma Valley residents in both the 2017 Nuns fire and the 2020 Glass Fire,” Salcedo said.

The press release also states that the EIR fails to adequately analyze biological impacts of the redevelopment, including impacts on the critical Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor, a pinch-point running through the property that supports the movement of a variety of species within the Sonoma Valley and as far as Marin County’s coastal region and Berryessa Snow Mountain National Wildlife Monument. Excessive development puts the wildlife corridor and the surrounding 750 acres of open space at risk, diminishing the ability of plants and animal species

to adapt to climate change.

The SDC Specific Plan also recommends removal of historic structures and landscaping.

Instead, the plaintiffs say in the press release that adaptive reuse of historic buildings, where feasible and as required by state law, would reduce resource and material consumption, put less waste in landfills, and consume less energy than demolishing buildings and constructing new ones.

While advocates support construction of affordable homes on the site, they stress it should be at a reduced density that doesn’t transform the rural site into a small city. “If Sonoma County continues on this misguided path to create new urban centers in its unincorporated areas, in the wildland-urban interface and on agricultural lands, both lives and communities will be at risk,” Salcedo said.

Because the county’s EIR doesn’t adequately study or mitigate the environmental impacts of such high-density development based on real-world conditions, “holding the county responsible for doing the job right is imperative,” Salcedo



Photo by Paul Goguen

A service road on the Sonoma Developmental Center campus.

said. “We, as citizens and taxpayers, deserve nothing less. The property, as critical as it is to our health and well-being, deserves nothing less.”

The California Department of General Services (DGS) is currently evaluating the three proposals from two developers and one community group who would like to be chosen to develop the site. According to an email sent from First District Supervisor Susan Gorin on Jan. 23, DGS now expects to select a developer this spring or summer. DGS had previously told developers they would make a selection in early 2023.

For more information about SCALE, visit scaledownsd.org.

Editor’s note: Tracy Salcedo, who is quoted in this article, is a member of SCALE, a party in the lawsuit, and has been editor-at-large and a frequent contributor to the Kenwood Press.