

Protesters challenge expanded site proposal

More than 250 people voiced anger over developer's plans for Sonoma Developmental Center



Over 250 people gathered on Sunday morning at the Sonoma Developmental Center to express their dissatisfaction with the current plans for developing the grounds around Arnold Drive. (Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune)



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Frieda Weinstein joined over 250 people, who gathered on Sunday morning at the Sonoma Developmental Center to express their dissatisfaction with the current plans for developing the grounds around Arnold Drive. (Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune)



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Mike White got up at 5 a.m. to work on a sign that expressed his dissatisfaction with the current plans for developing the Sonoma Development Center's grounds around Arnold Drive. (Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune)



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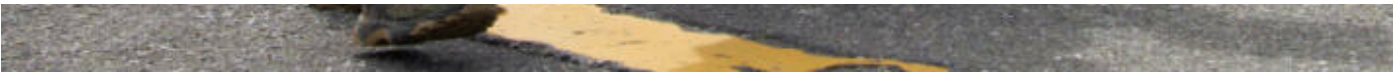


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From left, Janie Soto, BJ Blanchard and Margie Foster symbolically chain themselves to one of the oak trees that line Arnold Drive to protest their imminent destruction. Over 250 people gathered on Sunday morning at the Sonoma Developmental Center to express their dissatisfaction with the current plans for developing the grounds around Arnold Drive. (Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune)



Marina and Malaya Zachau hold signs at the entrance to the Sonoma Developmental Center on Sunday in protest of the redevelopment plans for the SDC. (Chase Hunter/Index-Tribune)



More than 250 protesters stood along Arnold Drive at the entrance of the Sonoma Developmental Center on Sunday in protest of the redevelopment plans for the former psychiatric facility. (Chase Hunter/Index-Tribune)



Speakers from Sunday's protest stood in the bed of a pickup truck to voice their reasons for protesting the plan by Eldridge Renewal to create 900 housing units and a 170,000-square-foot hotel at the Sonoma Developmental Center. (Chase Hunter/Index-Tribune)

BY CHASE HUNTER SONOMA INDEX-TRIBUNE

Surrounding the gates to the Sonoma Developmental Center on Sunday, more than 250 protesters decried the expanded proposal by the developers to redevelop the former facility for the developmentally disabled.

Sunday's protest displayed ardent opposition to the SDC's developer's plans,

which Sonoma Valley residents said threatens the community during fire evacuation, harms the wildlife corridor at the 945-acre property and does not adequately address the housing needs of Sonoma Valley.

“There are two things that galvanized Glen Ellen into a community that is fighting for its very survival: the fires of 2017 and the closure of the SDC in 2018,” said Alice Horowitz, a representative of the citizen’s action group Eldridge for All. “People are outraged about the way the county and the state have proceeded with this specific plan that has now resulted in the Rogal plan, which is a just a gross overreach.”

The developers, the Grupe Company and Rogal and Partners, were chosen by the state to enact the county’s specific plan to rehabilitate the Sonoma Developmental Center for residential and commercial use, in addition to protecting open space and addressing Sonoma County’s housing crisis.

In August 2023, the Grupe/Rogal partnership, under the corporation Eldridge Renewal, “blindsided” the county when it submitted an application to revise key parts of the project’s specific plan that had been approved by the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors in December 2022.

Using the a “density bonus,” the developers sought to increase the number of housing units by 50%, from 620 housing units to more than 900 units. The proposal planned for a 170,000-square-foot hotel in the northwest corner of the site, another 161,000-square-foot “innovation center” and roughly 80,000 square feet of nonresidential construction.

The density bonus is a California law that allows a developer to increase density on a property above the maximum set under a jurisdiction's General Plan land use plan. In return, the developer must set aside a number of the new units that must be reserved at below market rate.

Speaking from the bed of a pickup truck at the protest, Glen Ellen Historical Society representative Bean Anderson said the Eldridge Renewal proposal puts Sonoma Valley on the path to be the next Paradise, California. The town of Paradise was incinerated in the Camp Fire in 2018, which claimed the lives of 85 people.

Anderson said the Valley of the Moon Alliance, a nonprofit which reviews Sonoma Valley development, is seeking an independent study to provide “real, reliable and empirical” data on fire evacuations in Sonoma Valley, which will consider the effect of 900 additional residences at the SDC.

Some protesters' signs pictured images of flames hovering above cars signaling the community's trepidation. Other signs simply said "Stop Rogal" on top of a red octagon. Many protesters held paper chains over their shoulders figuratively tying them to the Sonoma Developmental Center.

Sonoma Valley resident Charlie Estudillo has lived near the SDC for 45 years. He said he began following the redevelopment of the SDC through public meetings on Zoom during the pandemic. He has since become a volunteer with Eldridge 100, a citizen's action group seeking a smaller redevelopment plan.

"It's not to scale, especially the Rogal (plan)," Estudillo said. "We were here in the 2017 fires. We know people who were lucky to get out. We know people who lost their houses in Glen Ellen."

While Estudillo's main concern was fixed on fire evacuations, he also mentioned the importance of protecting the wildlife corridor that spans Sonoma Mountain in the west to the Mayacamas Mountains in the east. He said the Eldridge Renewal plan will inhibit wildlife crossing Highway 12 safely.

Whether concerns have risen from animals moving east to west or residents evacuating north to south, these issues have fallen on deaf ears at the county, the state and the developers.

"What's the solution to correct those problems? Scale it down," Horowitz said. "I think, then people will be willing to work together. But right now, we have been blown off and not listened to. And we're angry about it."

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