

Sonoma Developmental Center. What's the deal?

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The State of California **recently announced** that it had selected the team to redevelop the SDC campus, two firms which together will transform roughly 180 acres of the existing campus into housing, retail elements, and a hotel. But is it a done deal? When The Sun formally inquired about these plans, including the sales price of the property, we received a response from the State – which owns the land – that was long on rhetoric but short on specifics.

The reply, a masterful example of bureaucratese, seemed to indicate that the handshake is not as firm as we've been led to believe:

“After a long, careful review of the County’s Specific Plan, the proposals themselves, and interviews/Q&A, we have selected a group that is most in keeping with the County’s plan for the site and has a track record of successfully delivering projects like this. The selected buyer is The Grupe Company and Rogal & Partners (a team, not two developers). We expect that there will be a lot of questions, and we are looking forward to working with the community, County leaders, the potential buyer, and the Legislative members that represent the area on further refining the development plan for the site. The next major step is for the buyer and the County to begin discussions on the Development Agreement that will govern the redevelopment of the campus, and to continue to work with the Legislature on the proposal before them to transfer the open space to the Department of Parks and Recreation as part of the state budget process.” So responded Jennifer Iida, Public Information Officer at the State’s Department of General Services.

What gives us pause is the phrase “the potential buyer.” Is this a deal or not? Sounds pretty iffy. And although she indicates looking forward to “working with the community” we honestly don’t know what that means. Many hours were spent by “the community” in expressing its hopes, fears, and vision for the redevelopment of SDC; we can’t say we see much evidence of the State taking any of that into consideration. What, exactly, have the State and County heard that they’ve responded to?

Significantly, Ms. Iida’s response did not include any information about the sales price of the property. Is that still undecided, or in negotiation? It’s a crucial fact that the public deserves to know. What we do know is that the developers are on the hook for the remedial costs, estimated at \$100 million, to clean up the site.

So, is the State making any money on the property ‘sale,’ or essentially giving the campus to the developers in exchange for taking that \$100 million repair bill off its hands? More than 180 acres of prime Wine Country land and approval to build – what might that have fetched on a truly open market?

The shut-down of the SDC and the sale process has been going on since 2016. Throughout, the public has been promised ‘transparency’ and input. Public meetings, surveys, a citizen committee... the standard public-relations checklist.

But now, a sale that has no price tag? “We expect that there will be a lot of questions,” says the state. That’s our first one.