

Fourth time's a charm: SDC developer clears planning hurdle

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Eldridge Renewal, chosen by the state's Department of General Services as the favored buyer/developer for the former Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) campus, has received the green light to move ahead with its proposed redevelopment project.

In a letter dated March 6, planner Wil Lyons informed Eldridge Renewal partners Keith Rogal of Rogal and Associates and Rob Toste of The Grupe Company that Permit Sonoma has determined the partnership's project application "complete for processing."

The determination means Eldridge Renewal can proceed with next steps, including development of an environmental impact report (EIR). Permit Sonoma will spearhead the new environmental review process and "prepare the required environmental document," the completeness letter states. Eldridge Renewal, however, "will be responsible for the cost of its preparation."

The letter references the SDC Specific Plan and accompanying EIR, which was developed over three years as part of a legislated agreement between the state of California and Sonoma County. Major components of that EIR were determined to be woefully out of compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) by a Sonoma County Superior Court judge; the county Board of Supervisors essentially jettisoned approvals of both the plan and the environmental document in late 2024.

But the supervisors directed Permit Sonoma to stick with the SDC specific planning process, and the planning agency notes it must "revise that EIR in accordance with the Writ and Judgment and bring the EIR back to the Board to consider recertification along with approval of the SDC Specific Plan and related legislative amendments." Bringing the project into compliance with the SDC Specific Plan is required despite the fact that Eldridge Renewal submitted its application under SB330, the so-called "builders' remedy" legislation that essentially fast-tracks projects that include affordable housing.

Eldridge Renewal's project includes 200 apartments that would be "affordable to lower income households" based on area median income (AMI). "The project proposal is inconsistent with portions SDC from page 1 to 6 of the Specific Plan. Regardless of the builder's remedy, these inconsistencies must be remedied in order to conduct environmental review in compliance with CEQA," Permit Sonoma states in the completeness letter.

The planning agency's letter cites other conditions that must be met by the developer, which include:

- Completion of a "field study" by a qualified archeologist to "identify or evaluate archaeological resources as warranted;"
- Completion of a "full traffic study;"
- "Finalization of water rights, supply, [and] infrastructure, as well as wastewater treatment and disposal."
- Determination of on-site power generation and storage infrastructure;
- Resolution of "outstanding" questions about emergency evacuation given "cumulative impacts from multiple large housing developments in the area."

Permit Sonoma also notes it has 60 days to issue a determination of whether the Eldridge Renewal application is "inconsistent, not in compliance, or not in conformity with an applicable plan, program, policy, ordinance, standard, requirement, or other similar provision as specified in Gov. Code § 65589.5, subdivision (j)." This section of the government code covers the state-required Housing Element and addresses the conditions under which a planning agency can require a lower density for a project, including a determination that the development would have a "specific, adverse impact upon the public health or safety unless the project is disapproved or approved upon the condition that the project be developed at a lower density.

The completeness determination comes after a series of back-and-forth applications and rejections between the prospective buyer and the county planning agency. Now in its fourth iteration, Eldridge Renewal hopes to build 990 homes, a 150-room resort hotel, 130,000 square feet of commercial space, and more than 3,000 parking spaces on the 180-acre site. Demolition of all but four buildings on the campus are part of the phased project built-out. The historic Sonoma House is one of the buildings planned to be razed. All iterations of the Eldridge Renewal plan have faced concerted community opposition.

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