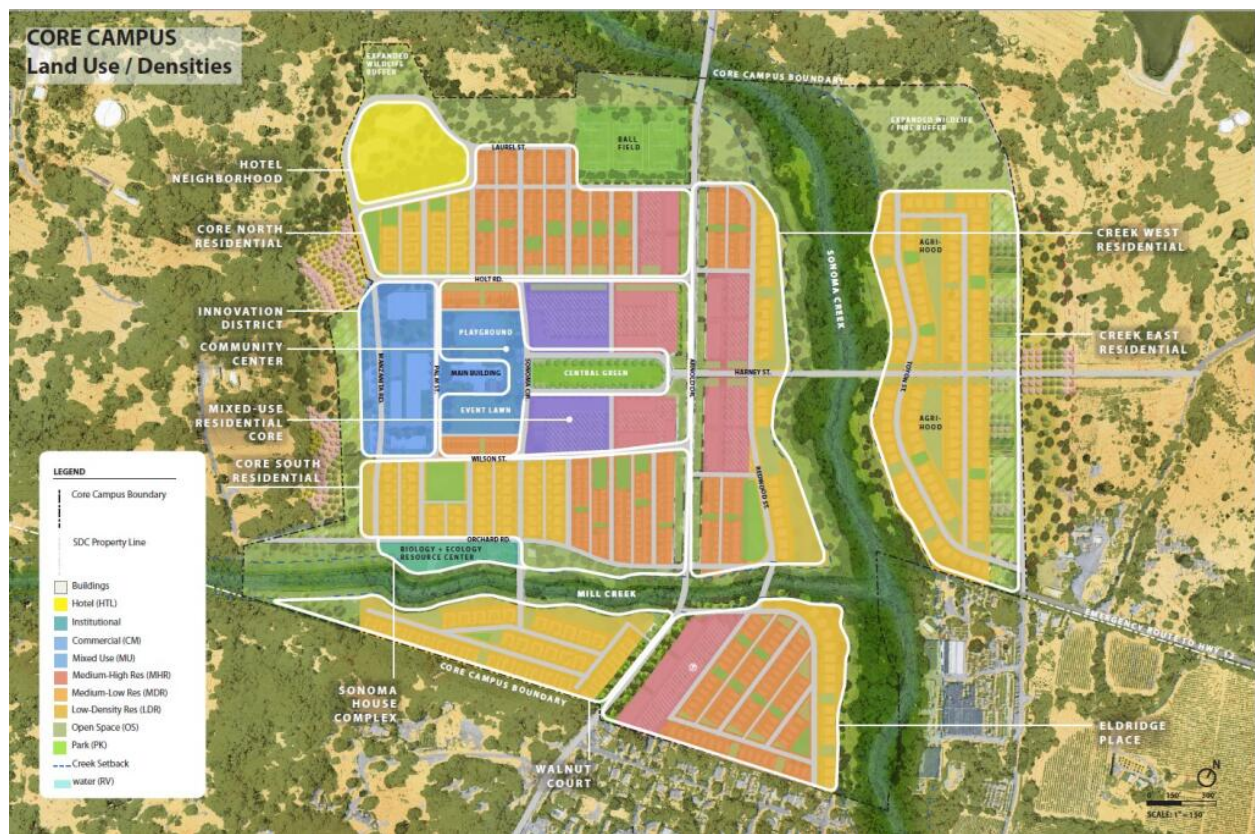


Sonoma County ‘blindsided’ as Sonoma Developmental Center developer seeks to add hundreds more housing units

The plans advanced last year by supervisors envisioned just over 600 housing units on the Glen Ellen campus. The latest one from the developer calls for 930.



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The plan to reinvent the Sonoma Developmental Center in Glen Ellen has been a source of near-constant community contention over the past two years. And the path took another twist this week when the developers, the Grupe/Rogal partnership, submitted an application to change the parameters and increase the amount of housing approved by the county Board of Supervisors last December.

“I was absolutely blindsided, and Permit Sonoma was as well,” Supervisor Susan Gorin said Wednesday, referring to the county’s planning and building agency. “It came in at the very last minute. I felt comfortable about Keith Rogal and Grupe, and how they were engaging the community. And this came out of nowhere.”

The application sets the stage for what could be another contentious chapter in the saga of the former residential campus for the state’s most developmentally disabled people. It closed five years ago, leaving a 945-acre Sonoma Valley property that offers a combination of open space, access, scenic beauty and historical significance perhaps unparalleled in the county.

In dispute now is just how this latest proposal from the state’s chosen developers is meant to be advanced.

Gorin and other local stakeholders have framed the Grupe/Rogal move as an example of a project seeking “builder’s remedy” status, a newish interpretation of California law that allows developers to skirt local zoning ordinances and specific plans when a local jurisdiction doesn’t have a state-approved housing element.

Sonoma County missed its Jan. 31 deadline to update its housing element. The Board of Supervisors approved the housing blueprint Tuesday, months behind the state deadline and less than 24 hours after the Grupe/Rogal application was submitted.

So far, the county has received a half-dozen applications for builder’s remedy projects. But Keith Rogal said this is not one of them, claiming he has legal standing to apply for a larger development without having to invoke the builder’s remedy.

The plans advanced last year by the Board of Supervisors envisioned just over 600 housing units on the SDC campus. The latest one from Rogal’s group calls for 930.

“We created an initial conceptual plan that we believe is consistent with the general plan and zoning of the property,” he said. “We filed it under (Senate Bill) 330. It’s an act that exists to bring predictability to timelines related to project reviews, and eliminates goalpost-moving.”

Rogal asked for patience.

“Six months from now, we will submit a full planning application that will have a lot more detail,” he said. “Along the way, starting very soon, we want to be getting lots of input and feedback, and we expect to improve and refine what we’re doing.”

The sticking point is likely to be the number of housing units designated at the 130-year-old SDC campus.

The Board of Supervisors had adopted a specific plan for SDC that included a total of 620 units — a mix of free-standing houses, townhomes and apartments. That number represented a last-minute compromise brokered by Gorin, whose district includes the former institution for the developmentally disabled.

At the time, it was assumed the developer could take advantage of a state-sanctioned “density bonus” to ramp up the housing units. The number floated in December was somewhere around 750 units.

But Grupe/Rogal’s new application seeks 930 units. Some stakeholders see it as an end-around.

“It’s extremely disturbing after all the public comments given about this project, to now see it 50% bigger than the Supervisors approved,” said Arthur Dawson, a historical consultant who lives in Glen Ellen and has been a consistent critic of the redevelopment plan. “It just increases all the issues we’re talking about. It basically doubles what the community said we could support.”

The issues Dawson referred to include concerns over traffic, emergency evacuations, water and disruption of the area’s bucolic environment.

Even more troubling to some residents, the developers are seeking to increase the housing stock at SDC without a proportionate gain in affordable housing.

As the total number goes from 620 to 930 units, those deed-restricted for lower-income households will remain at 124.

“We’re losing children in Sonoma Valley. We’re losing families, losing people on fixed income and small businesses. It’s a hemorrhage,” said Caitlin Cornwall, a member of the community collective Sonoma Valley Collaborative, describing the dire need for affordable housing. “So it’s very much an everyday calamity for the collaborative.”

Dawson doubts the project, as now envisioned, will do much to alleviate the local housing crisis.

“If you keep it at 120 affordable,” he said, “the most likely outcome in my mind is that it will become expensive houses that local people can’t afford. They’ll become second homes for rich people.”

Rogal insisted this calculus had nothing to do with builder’s remedy, and has been available to the developers all along.

Sonoma County code requires builders to earmark 20% of new construction sales, or 15% of new property rentals, for lower-income households. But Rogal said that does not apply to density bonuses. It’s standard for such bonuses to allow a 50% increase in housing units, he added.

Grupe/Rogal’s application gives the public its first glimpse into some details of the redevelopment plan.

The document proposes a four-story, 170,000-square-foot hotel at the northwest corner of the site; a four-story, 161,000-square-foot “innovation center;” another roughly 80,000 square feet of nonresidential construction; and 3,060 parking spaces.

But it is the housing units that are certain to ignite opposition.

The state originally wanted several thousand units at SDC, according to sources familiar with the process, and Permit Sonoma initially proposed 1,000 or more.

Then came the public outcry, which helped convince county officials to reduce the scale to roughly 750 units — a bargain that is suddenly in doubt.

The county can now choose to accept or reject Grupe/Rogal's remedy application, a decision even harder to read in light of the disagreement on whether builder's remedy is involved.

County staff hope to make a formal determination on whether the application is compliant by next week, according to Bradley Dunn, a Permit Sonoma policy manager.

"It does nobody any good to let this just hang there," Dunn said.

He said an initial review of the application raised questions as to whether the project includes the required 20% low-income housing, since the 120 affordable units would be far less than 20% of the total of 930.

"They essentially diluted their affordability," Dunn said. "So that's the problem."

If the county ultimately rejects the application, the developers could potentially challenge the decision in court.

As for the lack of warning, Rogal believes it was appropriate.

"There were 3½ years creating the specific plan, with people giving tens of thousands of hours of testimony," he said. "It was incumbent on us not to come in and fill the air time. We had to put it on paper, put it forward. We didn't need to be out in public meetings to know how people felt about the site. We already knew."

Wednesday, Gorin did not sound placated.

"Given the conversations I had with Mr. Rogal, this conflicts with everything we talked about," the supervisor said. "So it's really disappointing. And I find it disrespectful of the community planning process. We've linked arms with the state all along the way."

"I'm hoping for something truly magnificent on the site. I'm hopeful that can still happen, but I'm finding no faith in it."

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