

FAMILY ADVOCATES UNITED-PHA

November 11, 2020

TO: Chair Gorin and Sonoma County Board of Supervisors
Tennis Wick, Permit Sonoma
SDC Specific Plan – Planning Advisory Team

FROM: Family Advocates United–PHA

RE: The Future of Sonoma Developmental Center Site – Comments on the SDC Specific Plan

Family Advocates United speaks for many in the disabled community but the parent and family organization started, and remains, committed to the former residents of Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) and their families and the former staff who continue to care about the disabled community. Even though SDC is now closed, we continue to care deeply about what happens at the SDC site and how the legacy of years of caring for individuals with severe developmental disabilities is maintained at the site.

SDC was founded as a refuge for those least able to cope in a typical community setting and served as a place of last resort over the years to so many unable to function in society. It was not by choice that we lost this refuge and the haven that it had become for our loved ones. We would like to see something meaningful happen on the SDC site, and to preserve some form of care for those still struggling to survive in society at large.

Family Advocates United Opposes the Overly Broad Historical Designation

Family Advocates United has serious concerns about the proposed historic designation for a portion of the SDC site. This designation, as proposed, appears to have much more to do with architectural technicalities than the decades of housing and caring for the disabled on the site. Such a designation feels formalistic and far removed from the true legacy of SDC.

Family Advocates United Urges the Creation of a Memorial at SDC

Further, we fear that it will interfere with the community's interest in creating an innovative, nurturing, and multi-use campus. We do support, however, the establishment of a memorial at the cemetery that not only names those some 2000 individuals laid to rest there, but also tells some of the story of SDC.

The cemetery is powerful evidence of the abandonment of people with developmental disabilities. The memorial can partially right that wrong. The story of SDC is complex. Many innovations and dedicated, compassionate care took place there. The residents, families, staff, administrators, governors, and legislators, who contributed to improvements and good care there must be remembered.

We support the addition of land near and across from the cemetery that would provide access for those with mobile disabilities to the cemetery overlook and memorial. The addition of this land would be an important first step in the creation of a memorial that gives access to the peers of those laid to rest there, honors the lives and deaths of those who resided at SDC over the years, and those who fought for and provided high quality care.

Family Advocates United Supports Housing on the Campus for The Severely Behaviorally Challenged

Further, we also feel strongly that the legacy of caring at SDC will be best be served by the development of homes for those individuals who are still struggling to survive in the community, namely the severely behaviorally challenged. These individuals found refuge at the center and received immense benefits from the calming natural beauty of the valley, hills, and trails. These consumers are often not welcome in residential areas. The residents of Glen Ellen and the Sonoma Valley have a tradition of welcoming and accepting those with severe behavior challenges. Today, there is no comparable safe place to land.

We have concerns over the fact that no such refuge may exist for both the disabled individuals in serious need, but also for their families in crises as they struggle to find support in their attempt to find help dealing with them. We believe homes that serve the most disabled and challenging in the system would be the true way to continue the legacy of care that SDC was for so many, for so long. The open space around the developed site and the support

of the surrounding community makes SDC the ideal setting for homes that can serve those in greatest need.

Family Advocates United's Concerns About Housing for More Self-Sufficient Consumers at SDC

FAU-PHA also understands that there may be interest in creating affordable units that could also serve those more self-sufficient individuals with disabilities. We are not opposed to this possibility; however, we have concerns. First, how will these individuals access services from the SDC site? We feel that its location is not the ideal setting for those who may otherwise be able to independently access a worksite, shopping, medical and dental services, and recreation. We think it would be important to assure that such access (possibly costly) was available before proceeding with this option.

Additionally, we have concerns regarding fire evacuation for those with disabilities who are not served by twenty-four support services. How will such evacuations be assured? We believe that these issues must be addressed as part of any such housing plan.

Conclusion

We express our gratitude to Sonoma County, the staff, and consultants, as well as the volunteers on the Planning Advisory Committee, for their work on this important plan. We hope that you will consider our concerns in the planning and development of the future of SDC.

Sincerely,

Brien Farrell
President, Family Advocates United/ PHA