

November 27, 2021

To: Permit Sonoma (attn: Tennis Wick, Brian Oh, Bradley Dunn)

Re: Alternatives for redevelopment of the Sonoma Developmental Center campus

Dear Mr. Wick, Mr. Oh, and Mr. Dunn,

I'm a writer and editor, author of more than 25 hiking guides and books of essays about history and culture in national parks, including the National Outdoor Book Award-winning *Hiking Lassen Volcanic National Park*. I've also written number of articles and essays for newspapers and magazines in Colorado and California focused on place, community, and equity. I'm the librarian at Dunbar Elementary School in my hometown of Glen Ellen, and have lived in Glen Ellen for more than 20 years, raising three sons here.

I've also become what I never imagined: A community activist. Why? Because the future of an incredible place in my hometown, the one-time Sonoma Developmental Center, is being served up for redevelopment, and the plans proposed for that redevelopment are terrifying.

I have no doubt your inboxes are full of outrage, expectations, and suggestions (as they should be). Hair on fire is an apt description of how local residents feel about the scale of development proposed by Sonoma County for the campus. I'm going to try to stay in my lane here, and focus on the issues I believe should be the only issues on the table, as laid out in the legislation authorizing the three-year specific planning process: preservation of the open space surrounding the campus, including the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor, provision of housing residents of the Sonoma Valley can truly afford, and how a process that's supposed to have been "community driven" has been turned into a sham.

That said, I hope that you, as decision-makers and planners, focus on every issue raised by stakeholders, because each of those issues—traffic impacts, egress from wildfire, reconciliation of conflicting state mandates, etc.—is important to the future not only of Glen Ellen, but also to rural communities throughout Sonoma County and the state of California. Glen Ellen is in the crosshairs now, but it won't be long before it's Bodega Bay, Penngrove, Graton, Freestone ...

Preservation of Open Space

This is a no-brainer. The campus is surrounded ~750 acres of open space that should have been transferred to neighboring state and regional parks long ago. Sonoma County should request the state of California immediately transfer all open space, as delineated in the most generous of the alternatives, to Jack London State Historic Park and Sonoma County Regional Parks, which can ensure proper conservation. Further transfers can be made if it is determined additions to open space holdings are necessary.

Allowing the open space to become a pawn in negotiations over selecting a specific alternative, placating community unrest, wooing a prospective developer, or for any other reason, would be a crime. Permit Sonoma and Sonoma County should use every mechanism at their disposal to facilitate these transfers as soon as possible, and deal with redevelopment of the campus separately, on its own terms.

Provision of "Affordable" Housing

In my opinion, “affordable” housing is the only thing that should be built on campus. I’ve heard so many definitions of this thing it makes my head spin, but what affordable housing should do is obvious: People working in the lowest-paying industries in Sonoma Valley should be able to afford to live here. Vineyard workers. Grocery clerks. Nurses. Firefighters. Teachers (and yes, librarians). An alternative should be presented that employs whatever mechanisms necessary to ensure everything built on the property serves the workforce, whether through deed restrictions, housing land trusts, or just plain raising people’s wages.

If necessary, acreage around the Harney Circle could be zoned for commercial and educational uses. Moving Dunbar Elementary School to the site so that students living in surrounding Glen Ellen may walk to school makes good sense. But zoning hundreds of thousands of square feet for an innovation hub that could just as easily become an Amazon distribution hub would be an insult to the place, the community, and the process.

Community in the Driver’s Seat

I’ve got no doubt Sonoma County and its consultants will argue this has been a community-driven process. But they’ve checked that box in a cursory and dismissive way.

The reason you are seeing so many letters in your inboxes is because *people don’t see what they’ve said* reflected in the alternatives. Tossing a hotel/resort into every mix is the ultimate example: that’s a bone for a master developer. Not a single developer has stood up in any of the community workshops held over the last five years and said they’ve got an army of supporters for a resort on the property.

The other significant failure I see in the community outreach process is one of equity. Comments made by Spanish speakers have not been translated into English and made available, nor have (to my knowledge) comments made by English speakers been translated and made available to Spanish speakers. The disconnect was on shocking display in the joint meeting of the Sonoma Valley Citizens Advisory Commission, North Sonoma Valley Municipal Advisory Council (MAC), and Springs MAC, when Spanish-language translators had to sign off just as public comment began. Not only are the comments of neighbors lost in translation, they are also segregated by the process and rendered opaque by being incorporated into reports and summaries, rather than allowing the community to read each others’ desires and concerns verbatim. Sonoma County should make all public comments public so that true community discourse can take place.

The criticisms are many. Thankfully, there are good ways forward.

First, Sonoma County can renew its calls for the state to allow more time for a truly community-driven process to unfold, one focused on attainable goals like transferring the open space to park agencies and drilling down into how much housing can be built on the campus without trashing its precious natural values. I’m gonna say it’s a helluva lot less than the ~1,000 units proposed. My gut tells me it’s more in the ~300 range, which would go a long way toward easing the pain of the housing insecure in Sonoma Valley.

Second, Sonoma County must demand (along with every other stakeholder, including me) that the State of California deal with the infrastructure disaster it has created on the campus through its neglect. Such intense redevelopment is proposed to offset costs of infrastructure repair and replacement, because we

all know there's no developer stupid enough to take the project on without it. The one thing everyone agrees on is that responsibility for the sorry state of the site's infrastructure rests on California's bureaucratic shoulders, and California should use some of its budget surplus and federal infrastructure dollars to remediate its mess.

Third, we must, as a broader community, consider the best and highest use of the land separate from the impossible goal of economic feasibility. We've done it before. Abraham Lincoln did it with the Yosemite Act, setting aside a valley of rock deemed useless by speculators only to have it become a priceless national treasure. Theodore Roosevelt used his bully pulpit to ensure millions of acres of the American West were preserved for posterity as now-priceless national parks and national forests. Jimmy Carter was burned in effigy for signing the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), establishing national parks and preserves throughout the Last Frontier that now bolster that state's economy. SDC can be that thing for Sonoma County, if we are willing to step up as champions.

In Sonoma Valley, we are surrounded by market-rate housing, resorts, vineyards, and other development focused on economic well-being. We can, on the SDC, afford to let the best and highest use of the land be the land itself, a place where humans tread lightly, because well-being is hitched to natural beauty as well.

I came into the SDC redevelopment process a neophyte. I have had a hard, sometimes hurtful initiation into how people construe land as commodity and sometimes manipulate social and political processes. I've also been part of immensely gratifying interactions that have absolutely confirmed my faith in the fundamental goodness of people, and have cultivated incredible partnerships and friendships. I never imagined myself a community activist. I'm not very good at it. But this I know: SDC deserves every spare moment I have, because it is a simple, beautiful, healing place. It deserves the best. It deserves a light touch. I love it. And without places to love, we are lost.

Kindly,



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