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Flooding at Sonoma Developmental Center latest neighbor concern



The Nelson building on the south end of the Sonoma Developmental Center core campus in Eldridge. (The Sonoma Index-Tribune)

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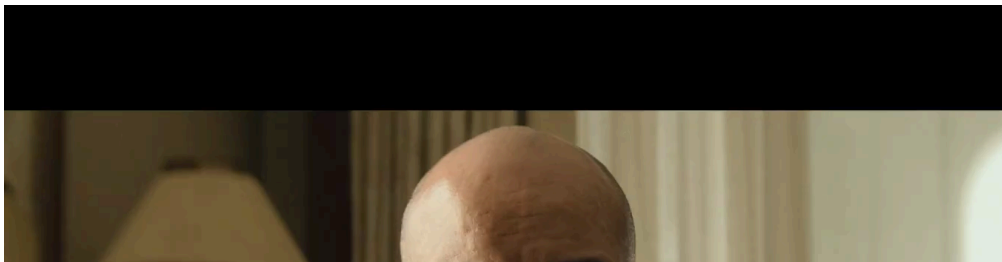
PUBLISHED: July 15, 2026 at 12:41 PM PDT | UPDATED: July 15, 2026 at 1:14 PM PDT

A host of issues, including inoperable fire hydrants, broken windows in numerous vacant structures, graffitied walls, stolen copper fixtures, dead trees and heaps of dry shrubs, grass and brush and, most recently, water pooling in the basement of a building on the campus are escalating the concerns of anxious residents who live near the shuttered Sonoma Developmental Center in Eldridge.

Some community members who frequently hike public trails on the property say they have noticed water in the basement of the Nelson Building, which sits along Arnold Drive, on the south side of the core campus.

"You could see standing water accumulating in the driveway, parking area and also water running down the handicap wheelchair ramp that takes you up to one of the doors of the building," said one Eldridge resident who asked not to be named. He said he was walking his dog on the campus last month when the pet tracked down the water sounds near the building.

"We got near one of the doors to the basements to the building and you could hear the sound of the water gushing out of the pipe and hitting the concrete floor."





Water accumulates in the basement adjoining the Nelson building on the south end of the Sonoma Developmental Center campus. (The Sonoma Index-Tribune)

Community members first noticed the leak on June 29.

A number of residents interviewed by The Sonoma Index-Tribune said they have since tried to report their concerns about the flooding to Sonoma Water,

Neighbors began calling the Nelson Building “The Flying Nun” because of its unmistakable roof design reminiscent of the large wimple worn by Sally Field’s character in the 1967 sitcom of the same name.

When the Sonoma Developmental Center was operable — the center was shut down in 2018 — the building was used as a [medical center](#).

Prior to 2018, water to the property came from Fern and Suttonfield Lakes, reservoirs located about a mile to the west and north of the campus. The water that is now filling up the basement of the Nelson Building is piped to the property directly from the Russian River via the Valley of the Moon Water District’s wholesaler, Sonoma Water.

“I don’t think it matters where the water source is being drained. I think it’s incredibly inappropriate during fire season... to be leaking gallons and gallons and gallons of water,” said another nearby resident, who also asked not to be named. This person said they have lived in Eldridge for over 10 years.

With concerns about the unchecked water seeping from broken pipes inside one of the buildings, many of the residents interviewed for this story say the unmaintained Sonoma Developmental Center property is facing a series of worrisome issues that exponentially increase its fire risk now that the region’s fire season — which could last through October — has begun.

In recent weeks, nearby residents have demanded the Department of General Services cut back overgrown dry weeds, trees and brush that has also increased fire potential on the property. In response, state-contracted workers have trimmed a lot of the overgrowth, but there is still much to be done.

Specifically, Sonoma Valley fire officials said, a number of fire hydrants on the property are now inoperable due to what has been described a water main break.

Residents fear that if the ongoing plumbing problems aren’t repaired, DGS might shut off water to the entire property.

As of this month, the Sonoma Valley Fire District confirmed that many of the fire hydrants on the campus are still inoperable.

SVFD Chief Steve Akre has said that three additional water tenders, large tankers that can each transport as much as 3,000 gallons of water to the site of a blaze, would be used to substitute for the out-of-service fire hydrants on the property. Even so, residents remain uncertain if that plan will provide enough water in the event of a fire on the campus.



Some fire hydrants on the property have been uncovered but remain out-of-service. (The Sonoma Index-Tribune)

The special district responsible for supplying clean water to residents across the region, Valley of the Moon Water District, has no jurisdiction over water supply and pipelines at the SDC.

“The system that is (on the core campus of the SDC) is a system that was built by the state of California over many, many years and it’s still under their ownership,” water district General Manager Matt Fullner said

Still, after complaints from residents who live near the SDC — and recognizing the unkempt state of the SDC property — the Valley of the Moon Water District Board of Directors recently approved a [maintenance agreement](#) that would allow the water district to conduct repairs on the campus.

The contract, according to Fullner, has been signed by the state and the water district and, pending some additional paperwork, should take effect the week of July 20.

“I think what’s occurring is that it’s leaking because people have gotten in there and stolen the copper pipes,” added Fullner about the flooding inside the Nelson Building. “So, we would try to find an isolation valve and just isolate those buildings so that the water isn’t even getting into them to begin with.”

A dearth of active on-campus security personnel has made it easier for vandals and copper thieves to access the site and resulted in significant damage to many buildings, windows, doors and walls.

Law enforcement officials have said they do patrol the campus and arrests have been made.



Gates around the Nelson building have been left open. (The Sonoma Index-Tribune)

In April, the [Sonoma County Sheriff's Office](#) reported two incidents of arrests on the property related to copper thefts.

The newly signed maintenance contract between Valley of the Moon Water District and the DGS means the water supply to a few of the currently inoperable fire hydrants on the campus may be restored.

"If something breaks, it can leak for who knows how long."

Also in April, the [California Conservation Corps](#) began groundskeeping at the property after an outcry from nearby residents.

Fire officials, citing the overgrown vegetation, said the campus was in violation of ordinance 13A of the Sonoma County Fire Code.

After more than two months of on-and-off groundskeeping, the core campus is still in violation of the county's code, fire officials said.

"The biggest factor we look at is that weeds are cleared within 100 feet of any residence or building. We clearly see now that there are weeds within that 100 feet so it's not in compliance," Akre said.

In addition to the weeds, dried debris from previously trimmed trees and branches line the walking paths on the property.

"It's not just the (possibility of a) fire burning here, it's the embers that the winds carry. A lot of homes were lost due to embers and it makes us feel really vulnerable. We certainly don't want to be Coffey Park," said Sharon Church, an Eldridge resident for over 30 years, referring to the 2017 Tubbs Fire that destroyed thousands of homes and a neighborhood in Santa Rosa.

Church, like other Sonoma Valley residents interviewed for this story, lives about 2 miles from the SDC campus.

Earlier in the week, as the [Ledson Fire](#), which broke out Monday, July 13, scorched more than 15 acres 10 miles north of the SDC campus while temperatures hovered in the upper 90s, Church monitored the blaze as she walked the public trails on the campus.

"I don't know if it's intentional on their part or incompetence," she said of the state's lack of upkeep and maintenance at the site.

The Sonoma Developmental Center was established in 1891 by Julia Judah and Frances Bentley, both parents of disabled children.

Since its founding, it had served under various names as a facility for people with developmental disabilities until its closure in 2018.

In 2019, the DCS took over management and oversight of the facility's 180

A DGS representative reached by the Index-Tribune declined to comment for this story, citing " pending litigation."

On Jan. 14, 2025, local nonprofit Sonoma Valley Next 100 filed suit against the DGS , Napa developer Rogal & Partners and The Grupe Company of Stockton.

The lawsuit accuses DGS of violating established historic preservation laws and contends it is neglecting its responsibility to protect the SDC site's natural resources under the Public Trust Doctrine.

In March, a Sonoma County judge ruled the case could proceed to trial.

A date has yet to be set.

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