

SDC study recommends confining development to existing campus

Chris Lee

A conceptual plan for the future of the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) proposes large portions be designated for wildlife corridors and natural areas, with any new development confined to the existing central campus. This outline was presented at a June 23 “community workshop,” hosted by the consulting firm Wallace Roberts & Todd (WRT), authors of a pending 3,000-page “Existing Conditions Report,” to offer a preview of its findings. Some 200 people attended.

The material that was presented focused primarily on the results of surveys and community outreach about the 860-acre campus, and an inventory of campus land and buildings. Notably, the land use proposal was presented as a recommendation from the consulting firm, not merely an expression of public opinion. “This is a framework for how we think the conversation should move forward,” WRT Principal Jim Stickley said.

The community input that informed the study was more direct. “A large hotel or resort would be seen as a failure,” said Tania Carlone, a facilitator for Consensus Building Institute, a subcontractor of WRT. “The general feeling was that there is a saturation of luxury homes, of tourism. Folks were consistently concerned that the development in the core campus could encroach on the open space.”

Supervisor Susan Gorin agreed that the community wants open space and parks. “This is who we are and this is what we value and believe in,” she said. Economist Walter Kieser of Economic & Planning Systems, another WRT expert, cautioned that the county’s housing shortage and low residential vacancy rate could create pressure to explore other options. “You see tension between uses that have a lot of market potential and uses that have a lot of community value,” he said. In the subsequent question and answer session, local resident Scott Braun was explicit about the possibility of a big development. “Anyone who thinks there aren’t plans out there is living in a fool’s paradise.”

Commissioned by the state, the \$2 million WRT study began 14 months ago but was interrupted by the October fires. Completion is expected in July or August. As part of the study, 65 community members were interviewed. From this input, consultants identified five community priorities: protection of SDC land and water, preservation of a legacy of care, community character and historical preservation, contribution to economic diversity and viability of Sonoma Valley, and a focus on community benefit.

Consultants also hiked SDC trails, measured Arnold Drive traffic, studied ecological conditions, and completed a detailed inventory of 50 of the campus's 140 buildings. "We were generally surprised. The buildings were very well maintained, for the most part," observed study architect Greg Yanito of the firm Page & Turnbull. Still, virtually all the buildings have asbestos or lead, which will require removal or remediation.

Whether structures can be reused will be a building-by-building question. "We learned that re-use is in some cases competitive with new construction, based on the proposed use and building type," Yanito said. For example, the 10 H-shaped buildings just east of Arnold Drive have cement trusses and sheer walls and are thus easily reconfigurable. Then there's the picturesque stone main (P.E.C.) building. It needs a large amount of work, but as a designated landmark, it cannot easily be torn down. It was built in 1908.

The campus central utilities infrastructure is estimated to require more than \$114 million to fix. Whether it makes more sense to refurbish or start over will depend upon the scale of any development proposed.

This "site assessment" phase will be followed by a second phase where various alternative concepts are whittled down to one preferred plan. The third stage is the actual execution of the plan. No one knows who will be in charge of these phases. It's "absolutely still up in the air," said Jason Kenney, Deputy Director of the state's Department of General Services (DGS), which owns the property. "To my knowledge, this is the first time that we are doing anything other than our standard approach." "Standard" would be to find an obvious public recipient, or sell the SDC campus to the highest bidder, as the DGS unloaded the Agnews Developmental Center in Santa Clara in 1997. It is now Oracle Corporation offices.

Discussions are underway between the DGS and the county, and include potentially establishing a nonprofit trust that could become the property's owner. DGS has pledged to dispose of the Glen Ellen property only after the local community recommends the best uses for it. DGS Deputy Director Kenney denied recent reports of pressure from the governor's office to dispose of the property by the end of Governor Jerry Brown's term in December.

DGS wants a master plan before it disposes of anything. Kathleen Miller, President of the SDC Parent Hospital Association (PHA) suggested moving more quickly on some issues, like transferring blocks of land to the adjacent regional and state parks. "Setting aside the open space now may simplify the long planning process ahead," she said. Supervisor Gorin agreed, then urged the DGS, "We'd like to work with you on interim uses for parts of the campus so we can maintain some security." Boyes Hot Springs resident Marianne Mazzucco Thompson said she learned lessons working with the Golden Gate National Recreation Area during the San Francisco Presidio transition. "Don't shutter your buildings; it invites transients. Interim tenants in buildings bring in revenue. Their improvements make the buildings usable." Plus, she said, it encourages visitors, which informs future responsible development.

DGS Deputy Director Kenney reaffirmed the state's position. "Our preference is it's

done as one package, so the community input process covers the whole campus.”

SDC currently serves 84 residents, who will all be transferred by the end of the year. Miller of PHA said, “Each patient will have a community setting (home) to go to. They all have a place.” SDC’s 900 employees have no such guarantees, but some will have jobs at least through next June, a “warm shutdown” period during which the state will pay to keep essential systems running. After that, finding more money is likely to require figuring out who is in charge. “All of those things are still being discussed,” said the DGS Deputy Director. “Honestly we don’t have the answers to these questions.”