
EDITORIAL

Charting a new course for Sonoma Developmental Center

For almost 130 years, the Sonoma Developmental Center has been a home and refuge for some of California's most vulnerable residents.

At the end of this year, if the state keeps to its schedule, the center will close its doors.

Residents suffer from traumatic brain injuries, autism, cerebral palsy and other intellectual disabilities. Fewer than 100 remain, down from about 400 when the impending closure was announced three years ago.

The transition from institutionalized care probably was inevitable. But it will be beneficial only if responsible agencies ensure that care provided in community-based group homes is sound and that specialized services, including medical care and crisis intervention, are available. Cutting corners isn't an option.

Meanwhile, the focus is beginning to shift to determining what will happen to the developmental center campus south of Glen Ellen.

Plotting its future is a once in a lifetime opportunity for the Sonoma Valley. The scenic 860-acre property is tucked between Sonoma Mountain and the Mayacamas and abuts two parks. It has forests, meadows, a 16-mile network of hiking trails, two large lakes and is bisected by a mile-long stretch of Sonoma Creek.

But the buildings and much of the infrastructure are in bad shape. Just upgrading the heating, cooling, electrical and storm drainage systems to current standards would cost almost \$115 million, according to a site report released last week by the state Department of General Services.

The buildings still need to be assessed for asbestos, lead contamination and seismic safety, the report said, with repair and rehabilitation costs potentially exceeding \$1,000 per square-foot.

Ironically enough, that may not be bad news, at least not for anyone concerned that the property will be sold for development. The steep repair costs, coupled with local development

restrictions, could limit the appeal to potential buyers.

That may be one reason why the state promised to solicit input from local government and stakeholder groups on the disposition of the property, rather than simply identifying it as surplus property and offering it for sale.

Among the possible uses in the Department of General Services' site report are housing and commercial, retail and

office spaces, an equestrian center and a satellite college campus. Two previously shuttered developmental centers were converted to California State University campuses, and

Sonoma State University officials have acknowledged their interest in potential educational uses for this property.

As the state's nonpartisan legislative analyst noted, revenue from the sale or lease of developmental centers properties — there are two others, also slated for closure — could help fund services needed by the former residents. That's a worthwhile idea.

But any plan for the Sonoma Developmental Center needs to protect the open space, water resources and wildlife corridors.

The best way to accomplish that is to limit any residential, commercial or educational uses to the core campus along Arnold Drive. Open space areas could be added to the adjacent state and county parks.

There aren't many recent examples of converting such a spectacular piece of public property, but one of the few is barely an hour away from the Sonoma Developmental Center. After more than 200 years as a military installation, San Francisco's Presidio was transferred to the National Park Service in 1994, with a trust created by Congress two years later to fund park operations through leases for commercial and residential uses.

We encourage the state to consider this successful model for the Sonoma Developmental Center, with a goal of benefiting its former residents and their former community.

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