

LOCAL NEWS

# **‘A real fire hazard’: Residents voice continued frustration over unkempt Sonoma Developmental Center**



Vegetation grows around a building on Arnold Drive on the campus of the former Sonoma Developmental Center in Eldridge Monday, May 11, 2026. (Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat)

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As warm weather continues to dry out the region, concerns from Sonoma Valley residents over the derelict state of the Sonoma Developmental Center persist and remain unanswered by state officials in charge of the property.

“There is a wall of unresponsive silence that is impossible to penetrate,” Susan Church, a Glen Ellen resident, wrote to The Sonoma Index-Tribune. “Zero sense of urgency from the state and zero communication.”

Church’s concerns are echoed by numerous demands and callouts on social media from other Valley residents for effective management of the waist-high, dried-out grasses that have overtaken the property, as well as the restoration to working order of the property’s currently disabled fire hydrants.

“What I do know is we have a real fire hazard and we don’t want to be the next Coffey Park,” Church told The Sonoma Index-Tribune on Monday, May, 11 referencing one of the areas in Santa Rosa that was destroyed by the 2017 Tubbs Fire.



According to officials, these frustrations are warranted.

The Sonoma Valley Fire District, last month, declared the property out of compliance with Sonoma County's fire code for failing to maintain minimum defensible space and clear hazardous vegetation.

"There are many parts of the property that are out of compliance with the county code," Sonoma Valley Fire District Chief Steve Akre said.

In mid- April, soon after the property's fire code status was publicized, members of the California Conservation Corps, a youth workforce development program within the California Natural Resources Agency, were deployed to prune back the overgrown vegetation on the property.

While workers, armed with weed wackers, cut back the knee-high grass on some parts of the property, much of the area — as of Tuesday — appeared to still be significantly overgrown and unmanaged.

It is unclear if the California Conservation Corps will continue periodic maintenance, though Akre said he believes workers with that agency are slated to return.

"More needs to be done," he said. "I honestly don't have an update or a timeline, but I think the work is ongoing."

If workers with that agency don't return to the site, Akre could eventually turn the issue over to Permit Sonoma, which handles local code enforcement.

He said if the state fails to perform proper abatement maintenance, the county could place a lien on the property.

He said such a move would be a precedent and he "doesn't even know what that looks like on a state property."

Calls to the California Conservation Corps' Solano office, which provided the workforce for the project, were not returned.

The California Department of General Services has been responsible for management and oversight of the SDC's 180-acre core campus since the center closed in 2018.

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For 127 years prior to its closure, the Sonoma Developmental Center served

While the state tried to offload the property, its efforts were pre-empted by a vocal contingent of Sonoma Valley residents who argued that a proposals to build a new, 2,400-resident community on the land would drastically change the Eldridge area, and could lead to heightened risk during emergency evacuations.

Any new SDC project has been put on hold since April 2024 when a Sonoma County Superior Court judge sided with citizens groups who sued to void the environmental impact report guiding proposed redevelopment plans.

The lawsuit “continues to cause delay with regard to the property’s disposition,” according to Fallon Okwuosa, a Department of General Services spokesperson.

In the interim, the DGS continues to pay for security, as well as maintenance, at the site with “available funding,” Okwuosa said.

That funding, which started at \$43.7 million in 2019, was only supposed to cover a three-year period. Now going into its seventh year, the available money has dwindled. Exactly by how much, though, is unclear.

Records on the DGS website do not say how much is left or show whether additional appropriations from the state’s general fund have been made to the Sonoma Developmental Center’s maintenance and security budget.

State records do show that California Conservation Corps has had an ongoing contract with DGS, the state department in charge of the property, which has paid the corps roughly \$600,000 annually for vegetation removal from the dam faces, fire fuel reduction, trash and litter pickup and other general maintenance work, according to the DGS’ annual Sonoma Developmental Center report.

Though this might explain who is supposed to be cutting back the vegetation, it doesn’t clear up the problem of the inoperable fire hydrants, which is another concern to area residents.

According to DGS, the nonfunctioning hydrants are primarily the result of water line breaks.

The DGS spokesperson said the agency is “working to address these water

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Akre said that while he has not received an update from DGS about any progress on the property's fire hydrants, he is confident in the proactive steps the district has taken to stage water tenders on the property, should a fire break out.

"Barring a major conflagration, we are very, very well-equipped to handle a fire up there," the chief said.

*Press Democrat staff writer Phil Barber contributed to this article.*

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