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*SDC Weeds Keep Growing, As Red Flag Winds Start Blowing*



**DGS Is Not Concerned?**  
By David Bolling

A month after the California Department of General Services (DGS) ostensibly found a way to fund an effort by the California Conservation Corps to start weed-whacking the overgrown grounds at the Sonoma Developmental Center, it became apparent that, well ... they didn't. At least not as of May 18.

After a day or so of hard labor in late April, a cosmetic trim had been applied along one block of Arnold Drive, along with an anomalous, roughly 50-square-foot patch at the very southeast corner of the 180-acre property, right up to the deeply-incised bank of Sonoma Creek. Some nearby residents have voiced the suspicion the latter plot was scythed by local community members, and numerous neighbors living

close to the closed campus have voiced the need for a citizen weed whacking brigade.

The weeds in question have grown head-high which, in some areas, means six feet. Weeds are so thick around some buildings on the east side of Arnold Drive they have swallowed up some of the substantial campus signs that display the names of buildings. Along with the weeds, more than a year of halted groundskeeping has allowed the incremental accumulation of broken tree limbs and an increase in dead or dying trees. An unsettling fuel load is gradually accumulating around the campus, which concerns some locals given the advent of wildfire season. Those fears were literally fanned when strong north winds gusted across the campus at close to 40 miles per hour during the 17th and 18th of May.

SDC sits in the path of a natural wind channel that blows roughly north to south, guided by the parallel mountain formations that form Sonoma Valley, and finetuned by the canyon carved by Sonoma Creek. During the firestorm of October, 2017, the wind howled across the SDC campus at well over 50 mph, guided in part by the contours of the creek topography.

Meanwhile, the absence of a significant security presence has fostered a gradual increase in building break-ins through smashed windows or breached chain-link gates and locked doors pried open. At least four prominent buildings have been penetrated, although there were few signs of vandalism beyond the ingress points during a building tour on May 15. The incidence of intrusion has gradually increased over the past year, based on an admittedly incomplete survey, but revealed by increasingly obvious points of entry, several in plain sight.

So far, a *Sonoma Valley Sun* survey of the property has not revealed any signs of squatters or homeless encampment. It remains to be seen if that picture will change as time goes by. Original plans, and State/County expectations, would have had a developer hard at work by now, conducting site preparation for a massive demolition project that would clear about 90 percent of the existing infrastructure. That hasn't happened because a Specific Plan for developing the property, along with the Environmental Impact Report to justify it, was roundly rejected in

Sonoma County Superior Court, and the County is now nearing the completion of a revised plan and EIR, expected to be ready for public review by June.

Meanwhile the County of Sonoma has no budget for, and no legal right or obligation, to help maintain the property. That responsibility rests with DGS, a state bureaucracy of near-staggering proportions, with 18 Divisions and Offices and well-insulated leaders.

When the Sonoma Valley Sun most recently asked DGS for comment on the ever-growing weeds and the general degradation of the property, channeled through a highly responsive Office of Public Affairs and its Assistant Deputy Director Fallon Okwuosa, the emailed response is at once interesting and profoundly confusing. The answer provided by Okwuso, presumably provided by a decisionmaker elsewhere in the bureaucracy, was this:

*“DGS continues to maintain the SDC property and pays for security and maintenance activities with available funding. DGS coordinates with CHP, local law enforcement, and local Fire, and maintains patrol and 24-hour fire watch at the SDC property. The public has been helpful reporting illegal activity to onsite security and law enforcement, and DGS appreciates it and encourages the public to continue to do so.”*

No reference to continued or future weed whacking, no concern expressed for fire risk management, or about the increasing break-ins of SDC buildings.

There was, however, a slightly petulant wrist slap with the following concluding message:

*“Please note the Sonoma Developmental Center property is currently subject to a disposition process pursuant to state law and the state is unable to provide additional information regarding the property at this time due to pending litigation, which continues to cause delay with regard to the property’s disposition.”*

We will discuss in great detail the latest status of that litigation, and of the alternative plans being promoted by Sonoma Valley residents with a far different disposition in mind for the property.