

SEPTEMBER 15, 2025

Comment period for revised SDC environmental study opens

Community meeting on scope of EIR set for Sept. 25

By Tracy Salcedo

Buckle up, Buttercup: Round two in the quest to re-envision the disintegrating Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) campus is now underway in earnest. Permit Sonoma, the county's planning agency, has issued the long-anticipated notice of preparation (NOP) for scoping a revised environmental impact report (EIR) for proposed redevelopment of the former SDC campus.

Issuing the NOP, which was posted as the Labor Day weekend commenced, started the clock on a 30-day public comment period, during which stakehold-



Photo by Paul Goguen

Protesters concerned about the scale of planned redevelopment, protection of the wildlife corridor, and evacuation safety, gather in front of the former Sonoma Developmental Center's Main Building in March 2024. Permit Sonoma will hold a public meeting about the scope of the second environmental impact report for the proposed development at Altimira Middle School on Sept. 25, 2025, at 6 p.m.

ers (water, fire, and other public agencies, nonprofits, and private citizens) can provide input on what they'd like planners and Dyett & Bhatia (D&B), the County's urban planning consultant, to study as part of the next iteration

of the SDC EIR.

The 30-day scoping period includes a public meeting on Thursday, Sept. 25, in the Altimira Middle School auditorium at 17805 Arnold Dr. in Sonoma. The hearing begins at 6 p.m. and

will include both a presentation and the opportunity for public comment. Written comments must be submitted to Permit Sonoma by the close of the scoping period on Monday, Sept. 29.

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Why Round Two?

The last EIR for redevelopment of the SDC failed to meet the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), so a redo is required by law. The second round also gives planners and stakeholders the opportunity to study mitigations for environmental impacts specific to the Eldridge Renewal redevelopment proposal, which was submitted in August 2023.

A brief recap: In December 2022, after three years of sometimes tedious, sometimes contentious hearings, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors approved an SDC Specific Plan and EIR that was immediately challenged in court by a coalition of community stakeholders who maintained the EIR failed to comply with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The court agreed with the plaintiffs: The EIR was memorably and vigorously rejected by Sonoma County Superior Court Judge Bradford DeMeo in October 2024. Following the court's direction, the supervisors decertified both the Plan and EIR, but kept the planning process in place.

Meanwhile, Eldridge Renewal, the prospective developer chosen by California's Department of General Services (DGS) to purchase the 180-acre campus, submitted a development proposal under the auspices of SB 330, the builder's remedy legislation fast-tracking projects that include affordable housing.

With the Eldridge Renewal proposal in the chute, the supervisors directed staff to revise the existing SDC Specific Plan and EIR with a builder's remedy "overlay." Following this directive, one of the alternatives included in the scope of work outlined for D&B meshes the previously approved specific plan, which called for construction of up to 750 dwelling units plus commercial space and a hotel, with the Eldridge Renewal Plan, which calls for construction of 990 units plus commercial space and a hotel. The EIR for the overlay plan "will be prepared to address the findings of the Superior Court ruling and to assess the environmental impacts of both the SDC Specific Plan update and the Eldridge Renewal Project."

Building a successful EIR

Tasks outlined in D&B's scope of work correspond to requirements for a CEQA-compliant EIR, and must pass muster with the October 2024 court ruling. Analysis of development alternatives is among CEQA's requirements, and four alternatives have been proposed: a "no project" plan; the Eldridge Renewal plan; the existing SDC Specific Plan; and an Enhanced Building Preservation Alternative based on the Historic Preservation Alternative included in the first EIR, which called for development of 450 dwelling units.

This last alternative was determined to be "environmentally preferable" the first time around, but was ultimately rejected by the County as not economically feasible. The court ruling called that decision "arbitrary, groundless, and even in conflict with the evidence in the record," and requires the County to provide "data, analysis, fiscal comparisons, or other data" to demonstrate the alternative's feasibility — as well as the economic feasibility of the other alternatives.

The County missed the CEQA mark in other areas, including adequate responses to issues raised by stakeholders, developing clear and enforceable mitigations for environmental impacts, including a mitigation monitoring and reporting program, analysis of traffic impacts in an emergency or wildfire evacuation, and more.

Environmental impacts in 16 CEQA categories must be addressed in the revised EIR, including aesthetics; air quality; biological resources; historic, cultural, and tribal cultural resources; hydrology and water quality; land use, population, and housing; utilities and service systems; transportation, wildfire, and more.

What happens next?

Once the scoping period closes, County planners and the consultants will compile a draft EIR; a 60-day public comment period will follow the draft's release.

A timeline for the rest of the process remains uncertain. The NOP for the EIR was initially set for release in June, so the process is already two months behind the original, ambitious schedule, which called for a draft EIR (DEIR) to be ready for administrative review by late September. That original timeline called for public review of the DEIR to start in early November, then for the County's planning commission to consider a final plan and EIR in March 2026. A hearing before the Board of Supervisors, which has the final say, was set for April 2026 in the schedule Permit Sonoma published earlier this year, but could be delayed into summer 2026. The final Plan and EIR also must comply with the October 2024 Superior Court judgment.

To learn more about the process, the proposals, and ways to comment, visit www.permitsonoma.org/sdcproject. The Zoom link for the Sept. 25 public scoping meeting is available on the site. Planner Wil Lyons is the lead agency contact at Permit Sonoma; his email is sdcs@sonomacounty.gov.

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