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David Bolling: Scoping SDC – The Deadline is Nigh



It is instructive that when you consult Wikipedia for the definition of the word “scope” you are informed that it refers to “the extent of the area or subject matter that something deals with or to which it is relevant; the opportunity or possibility to do or deal with something.”

And then, by way of example, this prescient, probably AI-empowered information oracle suggests, “the scope for major change is always limited by political realities.”

Now, that example borders on the mystical, something from an astoundingly omniscient source, something that has crossed over the gravitational boundary into the information black hole of the technological singularity. Are you listening Ray Kurzweil?

Because the purpose for my innocent inquiry was to snag a few quotes to embellish my hope that you participate passionately, articulately, rationally and promptly in the *scoping* process that will define the necessary *scope* for the next attempt by Sonoma County's planning department (Permit Sonoma) to create another Environmental Impact Report (EIR) that will adequately review every potential environmental impact of building almost a thousand new residences – an urban subdivision, in other words – smack in the middle of a bucolic village, on a two-lane road, in a high wildfire danger zone and straddling a critically important wildlife migration corridor. In other words, SDC.

A mighty mouthful, yes. But stay with me a little longer.

As you hopefully remember, in October, 2024, Sonoma County Superior Court Judge Bradford DeMeo threw out Permit Sonoma's first EIR for SDC, along with the Specific Plan for building all those homes and the preposterous claim that nearly a thousand homes, 3,000 cars, who knows how many pet dogs, cats, gerbils and pot bellied pigs, lights and music and backyard barbecues would have no significant negative impact on the surrounding wildlife corridor or on the evacuation time required to exit the area to safety on that two-lane road through a high wildfire danger area.

Judge DeMeo was legally incredulous upon reading the EIR, promptly called it woefully inadequate and threw it out. Undeterred, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors decided to keep the SDC planning process moving forward, and Permit Sonoma approved a new project application from Eldridge Renewal LLC, the Napa/Stockton developers anointed by the State to build some homes there – specifically 990 (with a legal loophole for more), a 150 room resort hotel, 3,000 parking spaces and 130,000 square feet for commercial space.

Then, in May of this year, the Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to authorize hiring the same Oakland consulting firm – Dyett & Bhatia – that produced the first hopelessly-flawed EIR. Not to worry, Dyett & Bhatia explained, they will hire different subcontractors to do a lot of the work.

Which brings us close to the approaching September 29 deadline (at 5 p.m.) for public comments on the proposed project, the final opportunity for the actual residents of this blessed Valley to have a voice (again) in the planning process. And here is where Wikipedia's ominous example of the word "scope" comes back haunt us. "The scope for major change is always limited by political realities." Indeed.

Anyone who read even just the executive summaries of the first SDC EIR and its companion Specific Plan will know that, despite endless promises from County and State representatives to listen to local input and to respond to community wishes and concerns, virtually no local input ended up in the County-approved plan. Why, we should all wonder, will the second time be any different? There's really no reason to think it will.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try.

The County's entire plan, as imagined by Dyett & Bhatia, is built on the utterly arbitrary premise that only a build-out of close to a thousand homes, along with a resort hotel, will generate enough profit to justify developing the property. Which is a completely backward-assed way of planning the future of not just SDC, but of the entire Sonoma Valley. Numerous experts in urban planning have studied the property and see in it the potential for a true model community, built at modest scale, with half as many homes, and community resources for the arts, recreation, education, and model, self-sustaining energy use and development.

A public scoping meeting will be held at Altimira Middle School, in the Multipurpose room, on September 25 at 6 p.m. Between now and then, everyone who cares should shape clear, concise comments, buttressed by science and research whenever possible, and submitted in writing to: Project Planner: Wil Lyons (Planner): SDC@sonomacounty.gov.

If you need help shaping your arguments, outstanding advice and support is available online at eldridgeforall.org.

This will not be the end of the fight to save SDC and the Sonoma Valley. But it is a very important battle. To arms!