

Three-year deal struck for planning SDC's future

County, state agree on next steps for Sonoma Development Center

Jay Gamel

A framework for resolving the future of Sonoma Developmental Center's large open spaces as well as its dilapidated campus buildings was settled on at a special meeting of county and state officials on April 5. Sonoma County will put up \$150,000 immediately to start a three-year planning process aimed at mapping out a viable future for the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) property. The California Department of General Services (DGS) will pony up \$3.5 million to underwrite the planning costs.

The agreement was met with considerable enthusiasm by local residents, who have been working since 2015 to secure the SDC's open spaces for public use and see that the campus is developed with local input. The agreement seems to resolve those issues without being too specific about it. There has been much local concern over the possible scenarios of what could happen with the 945-acre property.

"The state has agreed that regardless of what happens with the core campus, 745 acres will be protected for public open space," Senator Bill Dodd's Chief of Staff Ezraha Chaaban told the audience at the meeting in the Board of Supervisor Chambers in Santa Rosa. The announcement was met with applause from the room.

At this point, that protection will likely take the form of moving some open space into Jack London State Historic Park and the rest to Sonoma County's Regional Parks Department. As with everything else, details will be worked out over the planning process.

Housing is also a stated objective for future development at the site, though no specifics were mentioned. The property is situated in a remote part of the Sonoma Valley and is accessible only by Arnold Drive, a two-lane collector road that would be difficult to widen significantly. There is little public transportation or other support infrastructure for extensive housing in the area.

DGS Director Daniel Kim also confirmed that the decisions concerning the center's future will include strong input from local groups.

The fate of SDC's aging campus buildings is still uncertain. A \$2.5-million analysis of the site in 2017 estimated the cost of demolishing or renovating the 140 buildings

spread over 150 acres could run well over \$100 million.

Senator Mike McGuire and Assemblywoman Cecilia Aguiar-Curry were present, along with Kim. The legislators representing Sonoma County have been working for years to reach this agreement. DGS will be responsible for the care and disposition of the property after the State Health Department turns it over at the end of June.

The four county supervisors on hand unanimously agreed to the \$150,000 funding needed to start the process. All four votes were required to pass the financial measure.

“A large challenge is that the planning process has only been given three years, a relatively short time, so there’s a risk that we’ll rush and miss ideas or opportunities that could make the site better,” said Richard Dale. Dale is executive director of the Sonoma Ecology Center, which has been active in “Transform SDC” a coalition of county and private groups working to keep the property’s future under local control.

“We need to clarify the vision for the site and make sure that it guides the planning process,” he added. “We will need to find funding and sensitive developers to bring the plan to fruition in a way that honors our community’s unique character. We need to clarify short and longer term governance for the site.”

The three-year timeline is a fixed deadline, McGuire said, but he expects it to be met with the funding and efforts being put in by all parties concerned.

Both Supervisor Susan Gorin and Dale said work will begin immediately to get the planning process underway. The aim is to produce a specific plan for the property that outlines how it will be governed and developed. Getting there will involve a comprehensive study, perhaps an environmental review for specific projects, and future rezoning, given that the entire property is currently zoned for public use.

Possible governing bodies being considered are a trust, somewhat like the Presidio Trust in San Francisco, a Joint Powers Agreement between the county and state, or something else.

Kim said the state will provide up to \$13 million a year for upkeep for the next three years to pay for the current fire and police departments on the site, as well as building and grounds maintenance. Ongoing problems with waste and debris could result in public access being cut off, Kim warned.

Local reaction has been warm and enthusiastic.

Several people from Glen Ellen offered to begin organizing volunteers to help patrol and maintain the grounds.

“I’m thrilled about the recent announcement,” said Melissa Dowling, President of the Glen Ellen Forum Board of Directors. “The Forum, other local nonprofits, and local leaders have worked tirelessly to advocate for a community voice and a formal plan for the future of the Sonoma Developmental Center property. We look forward to Glen Ellen community involvement in what comes next.”

“This is very promising and exciting!” Glen Ellen resident and activist Arthur Dawson enthused. “It speaks to all the work, passion and involvement of the community over the last several years.”

Steve and Shannon Lee, whose property lies next to the Developmental Center, have been concerned about the future since first learning the state was going to close the facility. “The fact that the state and county have publicly pledged support for the property and continuing community conversation during this transition is a very good sign. We remain cautiously optimistic that the outcome for the property will satisfy the needs of wildlife, the community, and the local economy while honoring the past use of this beautiful piece of property,” said Shannon.

An early step in honoring the past will be rehabilitation of the SDC’s cemetery, estimated to have about 1,400 people interred there. John Doyle, chief deputy director of the California Department of Developmental Services that has operated the center, said that his department, the Parent Hospital Association, and the Disability Rights Coalition, along with other local groups, will work on this. The Friday meeting was adjourned in memory of all the people who lived and died at SDC, which was described by McGuire as a “sacred site.”

Doyle also said that broken street lamps would be repaired starting in late May.

Loren Davis, a former Kenwood resident and firefighter volunteer at the Developmental Center’s small unit, advocated for full support going forward.

Several people took the occasion to advocate for an equestrian center to be the primary user for the center’s open spaces. However, that plan does not encompass any part of the center’s campus buildings.