

SONOMA DEVELOPMENTAL CENTER » *County seeking public's input on 3 proposals with varying degrees of housing, business and preservation*

Big plans for property



PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Dogsitter Tom Marion walks Molly at the Sonoma Developmental Center campus in Eldridge on Friday. The county is looking at three proposals for developing the 930-acre property, all with varying degrees of housing, recreation, business and preservation.

By **PHIL BARBER**
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Just about everyone agrees the site of the former Sonoma Developmental Center, the imposing state institution that has been dormant for three years, is a unique piece of property.

"Every time I'm here, I see something new," said Glen Ellen resident Sue Brusatori, who was strolling the grounds there Friday. "I like to walk to Fern Lake, and up to the orchard. There's no place else like it."

That might be the only point of consensus when it comes to re-imagining this slice of paradise. As the county puts forth three alternate development plans, it's clear the 930-acre property — a mesmerizing blend of historic buildings, robust nature and Wine Country access, with enough available water to be self-sustaining — means different things to different people.

To many, this land is foremost an opportunity to add much-needed housing to the North Bay. Others prioritize the former Sonoma State Home's rich history (some of it exemplary, some of it shameful), or its potential to be a local tech hub, or its importance as a wildlife corridor.

To some of the neighbors who know the area most intimately, it's just fine as it is. But freezing the site in place is the only approach that's truly off the table. Big changes are ahead for this corner of Glen Ellen.

County officials are seeking public input on those changes, beginning with a workshop on Nov. 13. A Spanish-language



Trish McVey, left, and Vickie Lingron take a walk Friday at the Sonoma Developmental Center campus. McVey worked at the center for 18 years, and Lingron's brother is a former resident.

session will follow Nov. 16 and a more formal community meeting on Nov. 17. Information on those gatherings can be found on the county website.

That the county is involved with the planning process at all is a unique arrangement, said Bradley Dunn, policy manager for Permit Sonoma.

The state of California owns the Developmental Center property, and it's the state that will eventually reap the revenue from its sale. In the past, California

agencies have guided and ruled over the "visioning" process for similar sites. Dunn mentions as an example the former Agnews State Hospital in Santa Clara, which Oracle purchased for its Silicon Valley campus.

In this case, the state has ceded those duties to Sonoma County, providing officials and residents here with unprecedented input in deciding what the property will

PLANS

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look like in 20 years.

The three alternatives floated by the county last week all nod to the major goals of the project. All of them, that is, contain some degree of historical and ecological preservation, housing and business. But they prioritize the elements differently.

Alternative A, which the county refers to as Conserve and Enhance, calls for 990 housing units, including 240 designated as affordable; 610 jobs; 339,000 square feet of

historic building use; and 28.3 acres of open space, including a full 8 acres of recreational space.

Alternative B, or Core and Community, beefs up the housing units to 1,290, including 310 affordable units; lowers the job creation to 590 positions; offers 242,000 square feet of repurposed building area; and increases the open space to 40.5 acres, though only 5.5 would be earmarked for recreation.

Alternative C, or Renew, finds middle ground on housing, with 1,190 total units and 280 affordable units; centers employment with 950 jobs created; and de-emphasizes historic

preservation, with a more modest 148,000 square feet of reused space. It includes 41 acres of open space, with 5 acres of recreational land.

Something to make everyone happy, or no one.

Sonoma County Supervisor Susan Gorin, for one, would like to see more multiunit housing, rather than free-standing, single-family homes divided by fences.

Caitlin Cornwall, director of Sonoma Valley Collaborative, isn't focused on number of housing units at all. She simply wants a space that is well connected to the surrounding community and reasonably self-contained, with an elementary school, a health clinic, child care and a coffee house.

Sonoma Valley Collaborative — a broad coalition of local businesses, nonprofits, education and health officials, housing advocates and other valley stakeholders — is also focused on equity for the SDC land, hoping to avoid the sort of de facto segregation that currently divides the working-class, Latino area of the Springs from wealthier white enclaves in Glen Ellen and downtown Sonoma.

One point on which Cornwall is adamant, and on which Gorin concurs: A large, luxury hotel, one of

the elements discussed for Alternative C, is inappropriate for this area. Glen Ellen doesn't need that level of tourist traffic, they say. Nor will it benefit from the low-wage jobs associated with the hospitality trade.

If something else has to give way to housing and open space, Cornwall said, it should be preservation of the decades-old structures.

Not everyone shares that view, though. Some are keen to mark the history of a facility that became the first California institution dedicated to the developmentally disabled when it opened in 1891 as the California Home for the Care and Training of the Feeble Minded. It operated continuously for 127 years.

Many residents benefited from the nurturing care they received there over the decades. Others were neglected, sterilized against their will and allegedly experimented upon.

"Whatever they do with this place, they should honor all those people that had all those things happen to them," said Vickie Lingron of Santa Rosa.

Lingron's brother, who was deaf, lived at Sonoma State Home for most of his childhood and adolescence. She was walking the

campus Friday with her friend Trish McVey, who worked there as a program coordinator for 18 years. The Developmental Center continues to hold great meaning for both of them. They like to walk up the steep road past the cemetery to meditate next to the Old Grove Redwood.

"This place could use some healing," Lingron said.

Protecting the natural resources of the property, which include tracts of oak woodland, native grasslands, wetlands, forests and large riparian habitats along several creeks, is a nearly universal priority here. Gorin noted the wildlife corridor that connects the hills of Jack London State Park to the valley, and to the Mayacamas Mountains to the east. She worries that "monolithic blocks of development" could impede that flow.

But leaving footpaths for mountain lions and coyotes could prove hard to reconcile with the dire need for housing in Sonoma County. The county projects a market demand of anywhere from 2,000 to 2,800 housing units for the site in the next 20 years, outpacing even the construction-heavy vision of Alternative B.

Then there is the specter of traffic congestion. It

was already a problem in 2017, when residents had to evacuate the area ahead of the Nuns fire, which wound up destroying several buildings at the eastern edge of the property. That was a mess, said Brusatori, the Glen Ellen homeowner.

Permit Sonoma hopes to solidify a plan and bring it to the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors for review in January. The timeline calls for a draft environmental impact report in June or July of next year, and a final specific plan by next September.

There will be a lot of passionate debate before then. Gorin believes it will be worth the energy. In fact, she said, it's one of the main reasons she ran for reelection.

"In my knowledge, there has never been an opportunity in the county to have this level of citizen-driven process to decide how 200 acres would be reused," Gorin said. "I would encourage folks, don't despair. Your voices will be heard. And we're all working together to devise a spectacular, specific plan. This is not just for us. This is the future of Sonoma Valley."

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