

## CLOSE TO HOME

## SDC plan must protect wildlife

By EAMON O'BYRNE

**A**t a time of catastrophic wildfires, megadrought, species extinction and climate change, we can no longer view nature as a mere "asset." Nature is a resource critical to sustaining life, health and a functional society. Nature and ecosystems need to be primary concerns in planning any development.

For our future's sake, current planning models and processes cannot alleviate the housing crisis by abandoning protection of systems that provide clean water, clean air, less-fire-prone forests and wildlife that keeps everything in balance.

For the past decade, Sonoma Land Trust has been instrumental in securing the transition of the Sonoma Developmental Center to public ownership while ensuring the protection of crucial natural resources within it. We've been working with stakeholders to develop a vision for the property that could become an urgently needed model for growing our communities in an era of climate change.

Regrettably, recently released proposed redevelopment alternatives for the SDC property starkly demonstrate how much public planning needs to change. Each alternative is based on how much development can be shoehorned in — under rules often built on outdated concepts and information — rather than beginning with the values this site should embody for our community's future. None of the proposed alternatives describes in any detail how the wildlife corridor will be protected. At stake is ground zero for one of the region's most important wildlife corridors.

The Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor is part of the longer Marin Coast to Blue Ridge Critical Linkage, which has been

identified in the Bay Area Critical Linkages Project and Conservation Lands Network as a continentally important wildlife linkage. This corridor narrows down to a critical pinchpoint in the Sonoma Valley, between the Mayacamas and Sonoma Mountain. The narrowest part of that pinchpoint is precisely located at SDC. The most important ecological benefit of the property is to provide habitat connectivity across the wildlife corridor, which has already been impacted by habitat loss and fragmentation due to an increase in vineyard planting and exurban development.

It is critically important that any development proposal for the property protects the wildlife corridor located there. The good news is that carefully planned redevelopment of the property, including both protecting the wildlife corridor and providing affordable housing, is possible. The key is to keep development of any kind (e.g., buildings, roads, parking lots, playgrounds, lighting, etc.) away from the northern portion of the property along Sonoma Creek.

Now is the time to rethink how we build for the future and create vibrant, equitable communities that embrace the stewardship of the essential natural systems needed to ensure the health and well-being of all Sonoma Valley communities.

We urge our community to attend the public meetings on Saturday and Wednesday to share your perspectives on the future of the Sonoma Developmental Center and the wildlife corridor. You can register to attend and find out more by visiting [sdcspecificplan.com/meetings](https://sdcspecificplan.com/meetings). You can also comment at [sdcspecificplan.com/contact](https://sdcspecificplan.com/contact).

*Eamon O'Byrne is the executive director of Sonoma Land Trust.*