

Fractionous reset on disputed project

As latest county study begins, opposition runs deep in Glen Ellen

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Standing at the front of the multipurpose room at Altimira Middle School in Sonoma last Thursday evening, Andrew Hill kicked off the latest meeting tied to the redevelopment of the Sonoma Developmental Center with a simple introduction.

“The purpose of the meeting tonight is really to hear from you all about the scope and the content of the (environmental impact report),” Hill, a principal with the urban planning firm Dyett & Bhatia told 150 to 175 community members assembled in the room.

“Yeah, right!” someone in the audience jeered.

That set the tone for a multi-hour event that was sometimes measured, sometimes vitriolic and consistently contentious. Oakland-based Dyett & Bhatia has been selected by county leaders, again, to prepare two massive documents, a specific plan and environmental impact report, meant to guide redevelopment of the historic 180-campus in the Sonoma Valley hamlet of Eldridge.

After voicing their concerns for several years, many residents of the wildland-adjacent communities on the valley’s western slopes are convinced their pleas are falling on deaf ears.

They remain unhappy with the scale of the proposal put forth by developers selected by the state to handle the buildout of the project, Rogal Associates and the Grupe Company — rebranded together as Eldridge Renewal LLC.

While a lawsuit by project opponents led a judge to toss out the county’s initial environmental study, the proposal remains much the same. It calls for 990 housing units, 130,000 square feet of commercial space and a 150-room hotel, among other elements, making it one of the region’s largest single developments in a generation or more.

Thursday’s meeting was meant to gather input as the evaluation process begins anew. That input was overwhelmingly negative.

At one point during the scoping session, a commenter asked for a show of hands among those who favor the project laid out by the developers. Two people in the crowded room raised their arms.

Scoping session attendees enthusiastically booed the hotel idea, shouted “No!” to mention of 3,000 parking spaces, catcalled when the discussion turned to evacuation routes and laughed aloud when Hill said, “We’d like to hear if there are concerns.”

Staff members with Permit Sonoma, the county’s planning agency, and county supervisors have insisted they are listening.

“It’s what we expect when we go into one of these projects,” Scott Orr, interim director of Permit Sonoma, told The Press Democrat. “We heard that all comment up to this point has been a waste. That’s not the case. It’s a continuation of the work that happened before. We knew we’d be talking about difficult subjects during the meeting.”

Orr said planners got “exactly what we needed to get out of that meeting — the pinpoint issues we need to look at.”

Sonoma County leaders stress the need for more housing, especially affordable units, and they trumpet a unique agreement with the state that allows the county to take an active role in guiding the project. If decisionmakers fail to endorse a proposal with a realistic chance of appealing to a developer, officials insist, there’s a risk the state Department of General Services will simply sell off its land to the highest bidder.

Those arguments have failed to convince many locals, as their comments Thursday made clear.

The scoping session was set in motion back in April 2024 when Sonoma County Superior Court Judge Bradford DeMeo ripped into the original specific plan and EIR, calling them lacking on a number of fronts. DeMeo instructed the county to vacate its prior certification of the documents.

His decision came in a lawsuit brought by two grassroots organizations, Sonoma Community Advocates for a Liveable Environment (or SCALE) and Sonoma County Tomorrow, in 2023. They, too, had cited flaws in Dyett & Bhatia’s work.

The Board of Supervisors unanimously agreed to upgrade the documents in May 2025, rewinding the process to an earlier step. Permit Sonoma selected Dyett & Bhatia to do the revisions, explaining that the firm will be able to build on the detailed research it previously did on the property. The company stands to make as much as \$913,000 for the new work; the money will come from the developers, and from a fund set aside by the state for this purpose.

The meeting at the middle school was part of a 30-day scoping period that ended Monday. Permit Sonoma received 310 written comments during that period, Orr said, a figure that doesn't count messages sent directly to the Board of Supervisors.

Next will be publication of another draft EIR, probably in early 2026, then a 45-day public comment period. Somewhere down the road will be a set of five public hearings.

At least 25 people lined up to speak Thursday, with several others expressing their thoughts over a Zoom feed.

George Psaledakis of Glen Ellen talked about the ability to sequester more carbon if a greater percentage of SDC's historic buildings are preserved.

Sherry Smith, an advocate for the developmentally disabled Californians who lived and died on the Eldridge campus during its 130 years as a residential institution, pointed out that construction could rumble 24 hours a day in the absence of a countywide noise ordinance.

Others spoke variously of the potential for increased intensity of storm runoff from development pulling more toxins into local waterways; the lack of low-income housing; and the insufficiency of 300-foot buffers separating wildland and structures during a wind-blown firestorm.

Just about everyone agreed that adding another 2,400 people to that area, as estimated in planning documents, presents a huge risk during wildfire evacuations. Glen Ellen residents were forced to flee their homes during the 2017 fires; some of them showed up at the scoping meeting to recount the gridlock they experienced on Arnold Drive and surrounding roads.

"Shame on you!" Glen Ellen resident Susan Brusatori shouted from the rostrum, to thunderous applause. "Shame on you for developing more homes and putting all of this community in crisis in the event of a catastrophic event. ... I am pissed. And I want to let the county know, and the Rogal group, there is a huge civil liability with this project."

SCALE and Sonoma County Tomorrow have partnered with another community group, Sonoma Valley Next 100, to push an alternative, low-density plan they call Provide, Protect, Preserve. Several commenters touted it at the scoping session.

They may be too late to dramatically reshape the redevelopment plan at SDC. But they know they hold a trump card: another lawsuit, should the updated planning documents point to a carbon-copy project.

"The reason the EIR got thrown out is because it was inadequate," said Arthur Dawson, a writer and historical ecologist whose home on Warm Springs Road burned in 2017, "Just to put Dyett & Bhatia and the county on notice, if the next one's inadequate we'll be back here in two or three years."

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