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Permit Sonoma chief fields complicated SDC questions

By Tracy Salcedo

Permit Sonoma Director Scott Orr drew a standing-room-only crowd to the August 3 Glen Ellen Forum community meeting, where he addressed a barrage of complicated questions about the redevelopment process for the campus of the shuttered Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) in Eldridge.

The main message Orr conveyed as he described the status of the SDC redevelopment process is that he doesn’t have specific dates for release of a revised SDC Specific Plan and environmental impact report (EIR).

“It takes as long as it takes,” he told the gathering. Permit Sonoma and consultant Dyett & Bhatia have been working for more than a year on a new plan and EIR for the campus redevelopment. The original plan and environmental report were jettisoned by the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors following a successful legal challenge by Sonoma County Advocates for a Liveable Environment (SCALE) and Sonoma County Tomorrow, who maintained the original EIR failed to comply with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

The new plan and EIR are focused on a project submitted by Eldridge Renewal LLC, a partnership composed of Keith Rogal’s Rogal & Partners and the Stockton-based Grupe Company. The Eldridge Renewal project calls for construction of 990 homes, 130,000 square feet of commercial space, and a 150-room hotel on the campus.

CEQA requires analysis of alternative plans as part of the EIR process, and Orr said the Provide, Protect, Preserve (PPP) Alternative, a scaled-down project drafted by a coalition of advocacy groups based on community input, has been incorporated. The PPP alternative calls for construction of 470 homes, with a greater portion designated as affordable compared with the Eldridge Renewal plan, and adaptive reuse of some of the existing buildings on the campus.

Timeline and process

Once the environmental review is complete, the next step is release of the draft EIR (DEIR), which will describe environmental impacts ranging from aesthetics to biology, geology, wildfire evacuation, and more, as well as the mitigation measures that can minimize those impacts.

Upon release of the DEIR, an official 45to 60-day comment window opens, Orr said, adding this is the “best time” for members of the public to submit a comment because “every comment we get, we have to respond to.”

Per CEQA, 30 days into the formal comment window, a public meeting must be held; at that time, verbal comments may be submitted, usually with a two-minute time limit, Orr said.

Once the public comment window closes, county staff and consultants can settle into responding to public comments as mandated. “That is one of the hardest periods,” Orr said, making it impossible to estimate how long it will take.

As part of the review process, the planning agency will present the DEIR and draft specific plan to the Sonoma Valley Citizens Advisory Commission, Springs Municipal Advisory Council, North Sonoma Valley Municipal Advisory Council, and the county’s Planning Commission for comment and analysis. A final Specific Plan and EIR, along with recommendations from the Planning Commission and other administrative bodies, will then be submitted for consideration by the Board of Supervisors, which will make a final decision on the project.

While Orr said the state has been pushing for the planning process to be completed by the end of 2026, he noted “a lot of steps” need to be completed and Permit Sonoma is unable “to estimate how long the steps will take.” He acknowledged the process may extend into 2027.

“My head hurts”: Builders remedy and other complications

The Eldridge Renewal project benefits from its status as a builders remedy application, which provides a fast track for developments that include affordable housing in their plan. The builders remedy essentially exempts the project from a number of policies and zoning regulations that a project of this size would ordinarily be subject to, Orr explained.

This status was, understandably, the focus of a number of questions from Forum attendees.

Orr began by addressing the so-called “five meeting rule.” The legislation restricts the number of public hearings on a builders remedy project to five, but because an “array” of meetings is needed to address all aspects of a project as monumental as the SDC, some meetings may be combined, Orr said. Combined meetings “will make for a very long day,” but the planning chief noted they could be held at sites in Sonoma Valley.

Glen Ellen’s Bruce Goldstein asked why the county is not holding off on processing the Eldridge Renewal application given all the constraints its builders remedy status has imposed on the process — and the fact that the developer’s standing as a legitimate candidate for the site’s ownership is being challenged in court by Sonoma Valley Next 100, an advocacy nonprofit. The Next 100 alleges Eldridge Renewal’s selection by California’s Department of General Services (DGS) as the preferred purchaser violates the state’s Surplus Land Act, which prioritizes sale of surplus lands to “housing sponsors,” such as trusts, corporations, or tribes, that will redevelop the land with affordable housing as a priority.

“We can’t just decide hey, we’re going to stop working on your permit until this other process that we have no control over, or involvement in, plays out,” Orr said. He acknowledged scenarios in which the work Permit Sonoma is doing becomes “moot,” but reiterated: “We just can’t hang out and wait …” In response to a series of questions from Valley of the Moon Alliance's Chris Koch, Orr stated that, even if the county's supervisors adopt the PPP as the specific plan or determine that the Eldridge Renewal project violates the county's general plan, its builders remedy status "overrides" both.

"The construct of the builders remedy is that you don't have to be consistent with any local planning documents," he said, eliciting gasps from the audience. He also acknowledged that the county is "working through what that means" when it comes to approving a project for the SDC — or any other project — that has a specific plan that doesn't conform to a builders remedy application.

Orr also confirmed that the reason Eldridge Renewal's project has builders remedy status in the first place is because there was a "window of noncompliance [by Sonoma County]" with state housing mandates.

Eldridge Renewal's application came in "maybe the day before" the county's housing element was adopted by the board, he said.

Several attendees asked Orr to suss out how the builders remedy could be rescinded, homing in on health and safety concerns related to the size of the Eldridge Renewal project. The answer was multifaceted, with Orr acknowledging that you can't build a housing project if, for instance, there's "nowhere for the poop to go." The county has to determine whether a project is "viable or not" based on CEQA issues but also must move ahead with a builders remedy project provided it is "feasible." The only way the onus of builders remedy goes away, Orr said, is if Eldridge Renewal's permit goes away. The developer's builders remedy status is not transferable, and a new developer would not be eligible to apply for builders remedy because the county is now in compliance on its housing element.

Visit https://permitsonoma.org/sdcproject for more information. Comprehensive coverage of the SDC project is available at eldridgeforall.org.

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