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Sonoma Developmental Center neighbors' frustrations grow following Glen Ellen Forum

Sonoma Permit official says draft environmental impact report for proposed SDC development may be released in September



Scott Orr, director of Permit Sonoma, talks about the future of the Sonoma

By **RUCHI SHAHAGADKAR** | rshahagadkar@sonomanews.com |

rshahagadkar@sonomanews.com

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Residents and neighbors left a little more concerned and frustrated after the Glen Ellen Forum's quarterly meeting Monday, Aug. 3, at the Jack London Saloon.

The guest speaker that day, Scott Orr, director of Permit Sonoma, addressed a packed room of more than 60 people about the environmental review process tied to a controversial transformation of the former Sonoma Developmental Center campus that stands as one of Sonoma Valley's largest publicly owned properties.

"There's a sense of lack of faith," Mark Newhouser, a local resident and member of the Glen Ellen Forum, said, reflecting the disdain and distrust that have grown among residents over the proposed transformation of the main campus, for housing and other commercial development.

Wildfire safety, traffic, water and wildlife impacts have punctuated blowback over the project, with court challenges tying up the mandated environmental study accompanying the development.



The Forum, now a local nonprofit, was founded 10 years ago to discuss and address the concerns of the Glen Ellen community, and none have been so front and central in recent years as the proposed transformation of the roughly 180-acre core SDC site.

The latest version of the project would add 990 housing units, 130,000 square feet of commercial space and a 150-room hotel on the shuttered Eldridge campus, the pastoral hub of what for decades was one of California's largest institutions for severely developmentally disabled people. Once Sonoma County's largest employer, SDC was closed by the state at the end of 2018.

Permit Sonoma, the county's planning department, has been tasked with overseeing an environmental report assessing the potential impacts of the project, put forward by the state-selected developers, Napa-based Rogal & Partners and The Grupe Company.

The liveliest part of the two-hour meeting was a Q&A session with Orr, still less than a year into the top county planning job but a longtime member of the department.



The top concerns for attendees formed a mostly familiar list: evacuation routes during fires, noise pollution during the development phase, the county's stake on the proposal and the "builder's remedy" designation that is allowing greater density under state rules designed to spur more housing production.

"We don't need these houses. I don't care what the law says. We don't need them," said Bean Anderson, board member of the Glen Ellen Forum, as the room erupted in applause.

"The population is falling down and I realize that's not your problem... I encourage you to find ways to take that into account."

California's builder's remedy

The builder's remedy in California is a legal provision that allows developers to bypass local general and zoning plans to allow denser housing projects than normally allowed.

The provision was added last year to the state's landmark 1982 Housing Accountability Act to ensure more housing production in the absence of local plans. Sonoma County, not unlike other local governments across the state, was out of compliance with the state at the time when the SDC developers filed their latest plan, allowing the project to gain builder's-remedy status.

Kenwood resident Chris Koch asked Orr what would happen if the development plan didn't align with the conclusions of the EIR on population density and if that would trigger an alternative specific plan that doesn't add as many housing units in the region.

Orr's answer – that the builder's remedy allows a developer to sidestep local planning documents, with no pathway for local appeal of that state-conferred status – elicited groans from the room. At SDC, that means the project is not bound by the area's specific plan or the county's General Plan, Orr said.

"My head hurts," Koch said at the end of his third question on that matter.

Orr said his agency's oversight will be limited to the environmental report being prepared by a county contractor, and a determination that will

A Sonoma County judge tossed the previous study, calling it and the county's 2022 specific plan for the campus lacking on a number of fronts.

"We do the analysis. We see what comes back. And we take an assessment of whether the project is feasible or not strictly from an environmental review and regulatory standpoint," Orr said.

Theoretically, Orr said, a project could be denied a permit and cease to be a builder's remedy project if it causes irreparable consequences to public health and safety.

Residents' concerns

The new draft study nearing completion is set to analyze a range of potential impacts on the region, including wildfire risks, traffic, noise, water and air quality and other resources.

Since the approval of the Sonoma Developmental Center Specific Plan by county supervisors in 2022, entities including the Glen Ellen Historical Society have submitted alternative development plans for the core campus.

Glen Ellen and Eldridge sit on either side of one main evacuation artery, the two-lane Arnold Drive. More people would mean more vehicles clogging the route in case of emergency.

"I'm going to be speaking for myself a lot here today. It's the frustration that I have dealing with my government. We'd like some sort of compromise between the community and the government," said one resident about the county's handling of one of the most culturally and historically significant properties in the Sonoma Valley.

Residents also questioned why the county planning department couldn't pause the review process until a decision was made in the lawsuit brought against the owners of the property, the California Department of General Services, by grassroots organization Sonoma Valley Next 100. The group claims the state agency violated the Surplus Land Act by not prioritizing affordable housing developers first and neglecting its responsibility to protect the SDC site's natural resources under what's known as the Public Trust Doctrine, which is meant to ensure public resources such as water and air

"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 about a possible future where the project doesn't move forward because of legal challenges.

"But we can't look to that future possibility and just say, 'We're going to just hang out and see what happens.'"

Under state law, the forthcoming report must also highlight alternative plans for development, including a no-development option. One of the alternative plans, Orr said, would be a historic preservation alternative – keeping historic but deteriorating buildings on the core campus while developing the space around it.

Many residents questioned the feasibility of that alternative amid concerns about diminished property maintenance, with local fire officials finding the site in violation of the county's fire code. Residents who hike trails on the campus have complained of piles of dry grass, walls vandalized with graffiti, flooded buildings and fire hydrants that remain out of service.

Residents who have complained over those issues feel their reports have fallen on deaf ears with the state. At the forum, they questioned how their concerns would factor into the county's review phase.

"I think what we're hoping to see is a little bit more good faith effort to push back on the state's position on this by the county," Newhouser said, inquiring if the county could prevent the builder's remedy development that would effectively alter the small-town charm of the neighborhood.

The next meeting on that forthcoming report, according to Orr, will open up a 30-day public period after release of the draft environmental report. Orr said he did not have a specific target date for the report's release. All public comments will be taken into consideration before the draft is advanced to the Sonoma County Planning Commission.

You can reach Staff Writer Ruchi Shahagadkar at rshahagadkar@sonomanews.com or 707-521-4247.

Past and future of Sonoma Developmental Center

The institution that became Sonoma State Hospital, and later Sonoma Developmental Center, was established in 1891 by Julia Judah and Frances Bentley, both parents of disabled children. Since its founding, it served as one of the state's key residential care facilities for people with developmental disabilities most of those sites were closed. SDC's closure came at the end of 2018.

In 2019, the state Department of General Services, which oversees state real estate, took over management the facility. The bulk of the 945-acre property — wooded open space long used for recreation by the community, and adjoining Jack London State Historic Park — was eventually transferred to California State Parks.

In 2022, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors approved the SDC Specific Plan, which allowed for the development of the site based on local priorities, with community involvement, while preserving the history of the site and bolstering affordable housing opportunities.

In 2023, two grassroots organizations, Sonoma Community Advocates for a Liveable Environment (or SCALE) and Sonoma County Tomorrow had filed a lawsuit against the county for environmental inconsideration in their original plans. In October 2024, the Sonoma County Superior Court invalidated the EIR and the SDC Specific Plan — ruling that the plans violated the California Environmental Quality Act. By the end of the year, the board of supervisors had voted for Permit Sonoma to re-evaluate the EIR.

In February 2025, the DGS picked Eldridge LLC — a joint partnership between two California-based development firms, The Grupe Company and Rogal & Partners — to develop the 180-acre core campus.

Later that year, Permit Sonoma and urban planning firm Dyett & Bhatia conducted a scoping session to gauge resident concerns about the redevelopment plan for the property.

Many residents echoed concerns that still remain top priority for them — traffic on a key evacuation route in case of an emergency, noise pollution in the area and erasure of the historic significance of the property and bucolic charm of the region.

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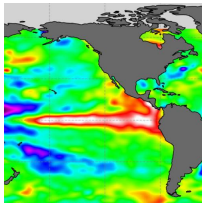
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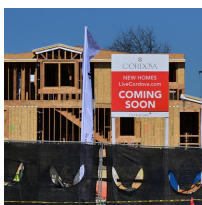
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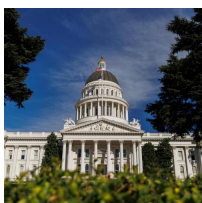
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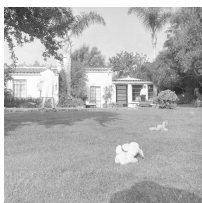
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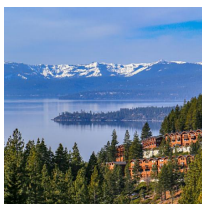
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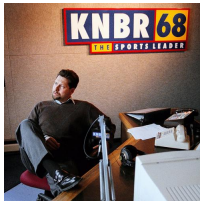
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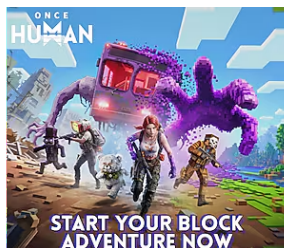
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