

County seeking input on new study of disputed SDC project



The Sonoma Developmental Center property along Arnold Drive near Glen Ellen. Chad Surmick — The Press Democrat, 2023

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Local residents have had a number of opportunities over the past three years to weigh in on evolving plans to transform the historic Sonoma Developmental Center property near Glen Ellen with a mix of housing and commercial space.

They'll have another shot next week as the county embarks on its latest attempt to shore up an environmental study that can pass muster in court, if not with project critics.

On Sept. 25, at Altamira Middle School in Sonoma, the county will host a public scoping meeting with its contracted planning firm, Oakland-based Dyett and Bhatia.

The meeting comes as many residents continue to call on the county for a scaled-down project, following a Sonoma County judge's harsh rebuke of the original environmental impact report Dyett and Bhatia prepared for the site.

That ruling assessed the most recent plan for the 180-acre core campus, submitted in August 2023 by developer Eldridge Renewal, a partnership between Napa-based builder Keith Rogal and Stockton-based Grupe Company. It calls for 990 residential units in a diverse range of sizes and styles, plus 130,000 square feet of commercial space, a 150-room hotel, a community center, gym, new fire station and about 70 acres of outdoor common area.

That's too much development for a large contingent of people who live in Glen Ellen and surrounding communities. The Sonoma Developmental Center shut down at the end of 2018, and about 80% of its land has been transferred to adjoining Jack London State Historic Park. The remaining campus, still one of the biggest properties in the valley, has been identified by the state as a prime opportunity to address housing needs and lend some commercial vitality to the area.

The scope and mix of that transformation, however, has been in dispute from the get-go.

Since the beginning of that state-initiated process, concerned residents have mounted a vocal campaign for less housing density, more historic preservation and the exclusion of overnight accommodations.

Their effort culminated in two separate lawsuits filed by grassroots organizations. One of those suits, filed by the groups SCALE and Sonoma County Tomorrow in 2023, challenged the county's certification of Dyett and Bhatia's specific plan and environmental report for the site.

Sonoma County Superior Court Judge Bradford DeMeo ripped into the environmental report in April 2024, calling it "vague, open-ended, and devoid of any clear mandatory requirements or performance standards."

Among DeMeo's concerns was a traffic study cited in the EIR, which estimated the new development would increase wildfire evacuations — primarily along Arnold Drive — by 15 seconds, bringing total exit time to roughly 90 seconds.

That calculation was derided by community members who spent much longer drive time while evacuating on clogged roadways during the Nuns Fire in 2017 and the Glass Fire in 2020.

The judge ultimately set aside the county's certification of the document.

In May 2025, the Board of Supervisors unanimously agreed to upgrade the documents, rewinding the clock to an earlier step in the process. Permit Sonoma, the county's planning department, again turned to Dyett and Bhatia, explaining that the firm will be able to build on the detailed research it previously completed on the property.

The county paid Dyett and Bhatia \$1.77 million for its first report. Now the company stands to reap as much as another \$913,000. Those fees will come from a fund the state had set aside for SDC redevelopment, and from developer Eldridge Renewal, according to Permit Sonoma.

Rogal, the Napa developer, has been making the rounds to plead his case. He has spoken before a number of civic clubs in the county in recent weeks, including a meeting of the Rotary Club of Santa Rosa East West on July 15.

The Sept. 25 scoping meeting, which includes a Zoom option, will give the public a chance to weigh in on what they'd like to see in the new general plan and environmental study.

The first hour of the meeting will be structured as an open house, with stations presenting information on the project.

That will be followed by a 20-minute formal presentation at 7 p.m., then public comment.

Meanwhile, another lawsuit in Sonoma County targets the California Department of General Services, which serves as the state's business manager, and the Department of Developmental Services, which oversaw SDC and the state's other former developmental institutions.

Filed in January by the nonprofit Sonoma Valley Next 100, the suit was updated early this month with an amended complaint seeking speedy judicial resolution.

In that amendment, Sonoma Valley Next 100 claims General Services has been applying to the county for development entitlements at SDC. But that violates a key legal provision shaping the process, according to the organization, because there is no working Specific Plan to guide important development decisions.

The group also notes that the state allocated no funding for maintenance of the SDC campus in the current fiscal year. General Services confirmed Monday that its staff vacated the site July 1. Only contracted security remains on campus.

"As a result, except for intermittent patrols, the entire campus property will be or has been abandoned, and is open to vandalism, break-ins and the outbreak of fires," the complaint reads.

Dyett and Bhatia is expected to publish another draft environmental report by around the new year. The county will then open a 60-day public comment period.

Eldridge Renewal used a state provision called "the builder's remedy" to bump the housing number to nearly 1,000 units; that provision allows for up to five public hearings on a project.

If the development plan moves forward through additional stages of approval, it could be well into 2026 before it reaches county supervisors for a final vote.

The Sonoma Developmental Center housed Californians with developmental disabilities for about 130 years before the state closed seven years ago. At one time, it was the county's largest employer.