

County planners, consultants get an earful at SDC meeting

Community members express frustration, fury with redevelopment plans

By Tracy Salcedo and Melissa Dowling

Emergency evacuation. Wildfire danger. Historic preservation. Water supply and pollution. The Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor.

Community stakeholders who spoke at the Sept. 25 public scoping meeting for a new environmental impact report (EIR) and redevelopment plan for the former Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) campus hit on those themes over and over again. They also took County officials, consultants, and Eldridge Renewal, the prospective buyer, to task for plans that they believe threaten lives, property, and natural resources.

About 175 people attended the meeting, held in the

Altamira Middle School multipurpose room. They spent the first hour moving between stations with posterboards that explained different aspects of two alternative redevelopments to be analyzed as part of the EIR. They were also able to speak with planners and officials about those plans, including First District Supervisor Rebecca Hermosillo; representatives from Permit Sonoma, including Interim Director Scott Orr; consultants with Dyett & Bhatia, the urban planning firm that will develop the EIR; representatives from California State Parks; and

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Keith Rogal of Eldridge Renewal, the partnership of Rogal & Partners and the Grupe Company selected by the State of California to purchase and redevelop the property.

The next half-hour was devoted to a presentation of the preferred alternatives by Andrew Hill of Dyett & Bhatia. The campus redevelopment now encompasses 160 acres rather than 180, Hill explained, because a separate development site has been carved out of adjacent open space for a new CalFire training facility; and a 300-foot-wide wildfire buffer has been added to the plan.

Hill also explained the nuts and bolts of the Eldridge Renewal redevelopment proposal, which was submitted under builder's remedy legislation that fast-tracks projects with affordable housing components. The Eldridge Renewal plan calls for construction of 990 dwelling units, 130,000 square feet of commercial space, a 150-room resort hotel and convention facility, and more than 3,000 parking spaces. The current timetable calls for phased construction to begin in 2027 and be complete by 2036.

Hill was met with 'boos' from the crowd when he asserted the original SDC Specific Plan and EIR, which were rejected by a Sonoma County Superior Court judge for not complying with environmental law, had been generated with community input. Mention of the proposed hotel complex was also met with 'boos.'

The final two hours were devoted to hearing from dozens of concerned community stakeholders. Many speakers focused on issues that should be analyzed in the EIR, such as assessment and containment of toxic materials; the effects of runoff and stream erosion due to an increase in "impervious" (paved) surfaces; the need to contain noise pollution generated during construction; and carbon sequestration, with Angela Nardo-Morgan of the Glen Ellen Historical Society (GEHS) noting that: "The greenest building is the one that already exists." Speakers

who emphasized the provision of affordable housing on the site, rather than market-rate housing, garnered applause from the audience.

On the subject of emergency evacuation and traffic, a number of commenters asked the County to include the community-funded SAFE Study in the scope of the EIR, drawing more applause from those in attendance. The SAFE Study, spearheaded by the Valley of the Moon Alliance (VOTMA) and conducted by KLD Associates, demonstrates that existing roadways in Sonoma Valley would clog with cars within hours of an evacuation order, with traffic slowing to a crawl that could be easily overtaken by a wind-driven wildfire, said Bean Anderson of Glen Ellen.

Stakeholders also offered a pair of new alternatives for assessment as part of the scope of the new EIR. The Provide, Protect, Preserve Alternative, generated by Sonoma Valley

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Next 100 and members of Sonoma Community Advocates for a Liveable Environment, including the GEHS, VOTMA, Sonoma Mountain Preservation, and Eldridge for All, calls for a scaled down redevelopment including 470 homes, 100,000 square feet of commercial space, a small lodge, and adaptive reuse of as many existing buildings as possible, preserving permeability on the property that would enhance the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor and mitigate the potential for wildland fire to become urban fire.

The Natural Resources Protection Alternative was offered by John McCaull, land acquisition director for Sonoma Land Trust (SLT), and Caitlin Cornwall, senior project manager for the Sonoma Ecology Center (SEC). In partnership with Audubon Canyon Ranch and Jack London Park Partners, the SLT and SEC conducted a detailed analysis of the impacts of proposed redevelopment on the property's plant and animal species, riparian corridors, and the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor, which were detailed in a letter submitted to the County. Their alternative would mitigate those negative impacts, reduce the footprint of redevelopment by increasing building height, and address impacts and access to increased recreation (hiking, cycling) on surrounding public parkland.

The meeting, called by one observer a "doozy," was also punctuated by emotional, provocative, and angry statements. When a speaker asked who in the room was in favor of the Eldridge Renewal plan, two brave souls raised their hands; neither spoke. Those not in favor, on the other hand, were not shy about expressing their dismay. "Shame on you, shame on you," said one. "This is a slap in the face to us," said another. "Don't stand down," exhorted a third, encouraging stakeholders to continue to express their outrage and concern. Another speaker called for study of a "no hotel alternative," noting Sonoma Valley is "in a housing crisis, not a hotel crisis." Several called out Supervisor Hermosillo for not taking a more visible stand against the Eldridge Renewal plan; several others noted more lawsuits would be in the offing if the EIR was not done right this time.

"Permit Sonoma: You have lost the confidence of this community, and I ask you to win it back," said Jon Wilson of Glen Ellen, who likened the meeting to actor Bill Murray's experience in the movie "Groundhog Day."

Public comment on scoping for the EIR ended on Sept. 29. The next chance for public input will follow release of a draft EIR, anticipated in early 2026. To learn more about the process, the proposals, and ways to comment, visit www.permitsonoma.org/sdcproject. Planner Wil Lyons is the lead agency contact at Permit Sonoma; his email is sd@sonomacounty.gov.

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