

# Lawsuit challenges Sonoma Developmental Center plan

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Calling it a short-sighted plan with serious environmental consequences, two community advocacy organizations have filed suit requesting Sonoma County scale back the proposed redevelopment of the former Sonoma Developmental Center.

The current Environmental Impact Report (EIR) is incomplete and deeply flawed, according to the plaintiffs. The goal of the lawsuit is to require the county to address critical environmental issues and provide accurate analyses for appropriate mitigations. The County approved the Specific Plan and EIR in December, as required by the state of California, which owns the entire 970-acre parcel. The state is now weighing proposals from potential buyers.

The advocacy coalitions filing the new suit are Sonoma County Tomorrow, Inc. and Sonoma Community Advocates for a Liveable Environment (**SCALE**). They contend the EIR for the 180-acres of SDC approved for development violates the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) on a number of issues.

The current plan, they say, would allow construction of up to 1,000 homes, 400,000 square feet of commercial space, and a resort hotel in the middle of rural Sonoma Valley near Glen Ellen.

“This intensity of development is completely out of scale with the rural community that surrounds the site and, because of the high wildfire risk, could endanger the lives of thousands of current and future residents of Sonoma Valley,” said SCALE

spokesperson Tracy Salcedo. “It must be scaled back to bring it into compliance with environmental law.”

The suit contends that the EIR also fails to adequately analyze biological impacts of the redevelopment, including impacts on the critical Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor, a pinch-point running through the property that supports the movement of a variety of species within the Sonoma Valley and as far as Marin County’s coastal region and Berryessa Snow Mountain National Wildlife Monument. Thus, excessive development puts the wildlife corridor and the surrounding 750 acres of open space at risk, diminishing the ability of plants and animal species to adapt to climate change.

The SDC Specific Plan also recommends removal of historic structures and landscaping. Instead, the plaintiffs say adaptive reuse of historic buildings, where feasible and as required by state law, would reduce resource and material consumption, put less waste in landfills, and consume less energy than demolishing buildings to constructing new ones.

Another concern is traffic during an emergency. The EIR’s wildfire evacuation analysis was wrong to conclude that adding 2,400 residents and about 1,000 workers on the site would have virtually no impact on evacuation travel time, Salcedo said. Portions of the SDC campus, as well as the surrounding village of Glen Ellen, were devastated by the Nuns Fire in 2017, when residents struggled to navigate backed-up one-lane roads trying to evacuate. “This analysis defies the real-world experience of Sonoma Valley residents in both 2017 and in the 2020 Glass Fire.”

Advocates support construction of affordable homes on the site. But, Salcedo said, “If Sonoma County continues on this misguided path to create new urban centers in its unincorporated areas, in the wildland-urban interface and on agricultural lands, both lives and communities will be at risk.”

Because the county’s EIR doesn’t adequately study or mitigate the environmental impacts of such high-density development based on “real-world conditions, holding the county responsible for doing the job right is imperative.”

“We, as citizens and taxpayers, deserve nothing less,” said the **Glen Ellen nature writer**. “The property, as critical as it is to our health and well-being, deserves nothing less.”