

Citizens sue to block report

GLEN ELLEN

Groups claim SDC environmental impact statement not sufficient

By

PHIL BARBER

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Two community organizations filed a lawsuit challenging the environmental impact report prepared for Sonoma County in its bid to redevelop the site of the dormant Sonoma Developmental Center in Glen Ellen.

The plaintiffs, Sonoma County Tomorrow and Sonoma Community Advocates for a Livable Environment, call the report — a massive 2,500-page document prepared by the urban planning firm Dyett & Bhatia and submitted in October — “a shortsighted plan with serious environmental consequences.”

The suit, filed Wednesday in Sonoma County Superior Court, seeks to force the county to revise the report, the plaintiffs say, to better address critical environmental issues and to provide more accurate analyses of subjects like emergency evacuation and protection of a vital wildlife corridor.

The suit states that the report fails to take into account the center’s rural setting, limited roadways, wildfire vulnerability.

In addition, it is “unrealistic and unresponsive to well documented concerns about water supply, open space, biological resources, historic resources, and a broad range of other environmental issues,” the petition states.

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The lawsuit was not unexpected given the prolonged vocal opposition to the redevelopment plan and the proliferation of lawsuits under the California Environmental Quality Act.

The county has long noted a substantial need for additional housing, and especially affordable housing, and has identified the 945-acre property, the site of a long-shuttered institution for the developmentally disabled, as a rare opportunity to make a dent in the shortage. It is potentially one of the largest redevelopments of public land in this county’s history.

It was not immediately clear how long the suit would delay development.

Permit Sonoma, the county’s land use planning and development agency, insists neighbors’ concerns have been adequately weighed over several years of community forums.

“While Permit Sonoma has not received the complaint, we did extensive analysis on this, and we take our obligations under the California Environmental Quality Act seriously,” said Bradley Dunn, a policy manager for the agency.

The California Department of General Services, which has managed the 945-acre property since it closed in 2018, will ultimately guide its sale and is evaluating three redevelopment bids. The department has no timetable on selecting a winning bid, a representative said Friday.

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors voted to approve the report and a companion Specific Plan on Dec. 16. In doing so, they scaled down the number of proposed allowable housing units from 1,000 to 700 at the urging of Supervisor Susan Gorin, whose district includes the 130-year-old institution.

The board also endorsed larger setbacks along creeks running through the property and capped the size of living spaces at 1,800 square feet to ensure affordability.

Those concessions clearly did not assuage the concerns of some Sonoma Valley neighbors. California Environmental Quality Act requires agencies to study environmental impacts and impose feasible mitigation measures and project alternatives.

“The Specific Plan provides neither mitigation measures nor a mitigation monitoring plan and fails to adequately analyze potentially feasible project alternatives,” the lawsuit states.

At the heart of the lawsuit are wildfire evacuation plans for the site.

With a planned additional connector route between Arnold Drive and Highway 12, Dyett & Bhatia argued in the report that the proposed development plan would increase travel times during an evacuation by an average of just 15 seconds, and a maximum of 1 minute, 15 seconds. “Thus,” the report stated, “the Proposed Plan’s contribution to wildfire risks is not considered cumulatively considerable.”

The plaintiffs contest that assertion. The housing units, hotel and shops proposed for the property could bring as many as 2,400 new residents and 1,000 on-site workers to this largely rural community, they say.

“This analysis defies the real-world experience of Sonoma Valley residents in both 2017 and in the 2020 Glass Fire,” Sonoma Community Advocates for a Livable Environment spokesperson Tracy Salcedo said.

In 2017, the Nuns Fire burned portions of the SDC campus, forcing the evacuation of hundreds of Glen Ellen residents.

The low-density advocates insist the report also fails to adequately analyze the biological impacts of a large development. Those include risks to the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor and to the 750 acres of open space that surround the central campus, as well as potential effects on greenhouse gas emissions and water quality.

The plaintiffs also are arguing that preserving the older structures at SDC, where feasible, would “reduce resource and material consumption, put less waste in landfills, and consume less energy than demolishing buildings and constructing new ones.”

They would not have filed the suit if they didn’t think there was a viable way to improve the report, Salcedo said.

Sonoma County Tomorrow, a nonprofit focused on land use and sustainability issues, was founded by environmentalist Bill Kortum in 1977. Sonoma Community Advocates for a Livable Environment is a new umbrella organization that includes long-established associations such as Eldridge for All, Sonoma Mountain Preservation and Valley of the Moon Alliance.

The plaintiffs are represented by Susan Brandt-Hawley, an attorney based in Glen Ellen. *You can reach Phil Barber at 707-521-5263 or phil.barber@pressdemocrat.com. On Twitter @ Skinny_Post.*

