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Sonoma Development Center proposal draws lawsuit and other updates

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Sonoma Group

As covered previously in multiple issues of this newsletter, the highly contentious and environmentally disastrous Sonoma Development Center project approval process has been progressing but remains far short of a resolution we could consider supporting, although there are recent noteworthy developments to report, including a lawsuit filed by community groups.

In review, the Sonoma Developmental Center is a 945-acre state property that was closed and designated as surplus land in 2018 after serving people with developmental disabilities for more than a century. The site consists of a 180-acre historic campus and 765 acres of open space containing a major wildlife corridor for mountain lions, bears, and home to endangered salmon species that swim and spawn in Sonoma Creek, which runs through the campus. The SDC lands are a strong match for designation under the state’s 30 X 30 Initiative. Sierra Club Redwood Chapter and Sonoma Group have recommended these lands as priorities to the Sierra Club California 30x30 Task Force.

Yet, despite nearly four years of county planning and hundreds of written and in person public comments critical of the EIR and Specific Plan, many submitted by Redwood Chapter and Sonoma Group activists, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors voted to approve the Site Specific plan and EIR during its Dec. 16, 2022 meeting.

At issue is the FEIR that provides zero mitigations and the “self-mitigated’ Specific Plan that contains few enforceable Conditions of Approval to protect the significant biological resources and community from the impacts of a new urban development. Located in the middle of a historic rural greenbelt adjacent to state and regional parks, the plan proposes up to 1,000 new residential units with as many as 2,400 residents along with 410,000 square feet of nonresidential space including a new hotel, retail and offices.

The EIR’s wildfire evacuation analysis claimed those impacts in addition to those of nearly 1,000 workers would have virtually no impact on evacuation travel time despite the real world experiences of valley residents who faced bumper-to-bumper traffic and long delays as they attempted to evacuate during the 2017 Nuns and 2020 Glass fires. The November 2022 California Fire Hazard Severity Zone map identifies the area’s fire hazard rating as Very High.

Justified as an opportunity to develop low-income housing, the plan ignores existing infill opportunities in neighboring communities that have transportation, utility, and fire protections in place. Vehicle Miles Traveled projections and resultant greenhouse gas emissions are estimated to far exceed state goals and guidelines.



Recently, two community advocacy organizations, calling the plan “a short-sighted plan with serious environmental consequences,” filed suit requesting Sonoma County revise the environmental impact report (EIR) for the SDC Specific Plan and scale back proposed redevelopment of the former Sonoma Developmental Center campus. Their goal is to require the county to revise the EIR to address critical environmental issues and provide accurate analyses for appropriate mitigations. According to the plaintiffs, the current EIR is incomplete and deeply flawed.

The advocacy coalitions, Sonoma County Tomorrow, Inc. and Sonoma Community Advocates for a Liveable Environment (SCALE), contend the EIR for redevelopment of the 180-acre SDC campus violates the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) on a number of issues demanding that the plan be scaled back to bring it into compliance with environmental law.

“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.

With litigation now underway, you can be sure the Sierra Club will continue offering support in whatever ways may be most appropriate to ensure the place once known as Sonoma Developmental Center is protected and its unique potential for appropriately scaled adaptive reuse is realized. Stay tuned!



Join us to demand that PG&E stops ravaging our trees and instead invests in modern infrastructure that will greatly reduce wildfire risk. State leaders must hold PG&E accountable for its negligence.

f **Take Action** (<https://addup.sierraclub.org/campaigns/hold-pge-accountable-for-infrastructure-failure-in-wildfires/petition>)



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