

Groups File Suit To Halt Development Of Old Sonoma State Hospital Site

At issue in the lawsuit against Sonoma County are open spaces and wildlife preserves, fire risk, and preservation of historic buildings.

Bay City News,
News Partner

Posted Mon, Jan 30, 2023 at 12:04 pm PT



The Sonoma State Home main building in Eldridge, California, on Sept. 20, 2019. The building is a prominent feature of the 945-acre property that once housed the Sonoma Developmental Center state hospital which was closed permanently in 2018. (Sonoma County via Bay City News)

SONOMA COUNTY, CA — Two organizations have filed a lawsuit against Sonoma County, requesting the court to put on hold the development of the site of the former Sonoma State Hospital until alleged flaws are addressed in the environmental impact report submitted for the sprawling project.

Sonoma County Tomorrow Inc. and Sonoma Community Advocates for Liveable Environment (SCALE) filed the suit on Jan. 18, alleging that the required environmental impact report (EIR) filed prior to the project being greenlit in December was incomplete, short-sighted and "deeply flawed."

At issue are the open spaces and wildlife preserves on the site, fire risk, and preservation of historic buildings.

"The EIR vision for [the site] and the adopted Specific Plan are beyond the capacity of its rural setting due to the realities of limited roadways, wildfire vulnerability, and wildlife corridor needs and is unrealistic and unresponsive to well-documented concerns about water supply, open space, biological resources, historic resources and a broad range of environmental issues," reads the plaintiffs' claim.

The goal of the plaintiffs is to require the county to revise the EIR to address their concerns and to ensure environmental mitigation plans designed to protect the area are made explicit.

Sonoma County did not respond to requests for comment about the lawsuit.

The Sonoma Developmental Center used to be a home for people with developmental disabilities for over a century before it was shuttered for good in 2018.

The state of California offered Sonoma County a rare opportunity to decide what to do with the 945-acre Glen Ellen property before it ceded it to them instead of imposing its own will on the expanse, provided the county took feasible steps to preserve open spaces, natural resources and wildlife, and historic structures. The state also said that any new housing developments should include affordable housing units, but that is already state law.

The final approved plan includes the protection of 700 acres, an enlarged wildlife corridor that removes current development from the northeast corner of the former main campus and an expanded setback to preserve the Sonoma Creek area. Plans for 620 units of housing will be subject to the county's affordable housing goals.

According to the county, the site will also become its own little walkable neighborhood, with paths for foot and bike travel along with commercial, recreational and civic uses for the greater Sonoma Valley. The county says the development will create more than 900 jobs.

Plaintiffs would like to see development on the site scaled back "to bring it into compliance with environmental law" and to prevent the risk of wildfires.

"The 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 in a statement released after the suit was filed.

The risk, SCALE alleges, lies in evacuation routes — or a lack thereof — that led residents to struggle to escape 2017's Nuns Fire.

The approved EIR addressed this issue and found that adding 2,400 residents and about 1,000 workers to the site would have virtually no impact on evacuation travel time. But SCALE says this analysis "defies the real-world experience of Sonoma Valley residents in both 2017 and in the 2020 Glass Fire."

Supervisor Susan Gorin said in December that the county recognizes some of the more controversial aspects of the finalized plan.

"Our community has expressed strong concerns over the scale of potential development in a rural area on the SDC campus and vulnerability to fire danger," she said in a statement released by the county. "While this compromise plan is not perfect, it visualizes a thriving addition to Glen Ellen with housing, jobs and protections for open space and natural resources. The journey is ongoing."

It's the "ongoing" journey part that the plaintiffs would like to be less opaque, saying that environmental protections in the development are "weak and inadequate" and offer no mitigation plan for any adverse impacts that may arise.

They cite California's "Look Before You Leap" law, which states that public agencies must consider the environmental consequences of their projects before they build. The plaintiffs allege that the Specific Plan's environmental plan and other preservations for the site have the words "should" when they should have the words "shall."

They don't want to see the area urbanized, but if housing is built there, the plaintiffs would like to see a Housing First approach that prioritizes residential units over commercial and hotel development. They would also like to see the affordable housing element maximized.

Finally, the groups want to see adaptive reuse of historic buildings on the site instead of removal.

"Holding the county responsible for doing the job right is imperative," said Salcedo. "We, as citizens and taxpayers, deserve nothing less. The property, as critical as it is to our health and wellbeing, deserves nothing less."

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