

Sonoma Valley wildlife corridor at risk in developmental center plans

CLOSE TO HOME

By

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Protecting the Sonoma Valley wildlife corridor was a main driver of the push to secure the open space at the Sonoma Developmental Center. Other goals include habitat protection, biodiversity preservation, wildfire risk reduction and defense against climate change. While these lands are on their way to permanent protection, several concerns need to be addressed.

Most importantly, Sonoma Creek and significant tributaries do not appear to have been included in the open space to be conveyed to state parks. The creeks run through the campus, which is slated for major development.

That is of concern because riparian corridors are often among the most frequently traversed parts of a wildlife corridor. These waterways knit together parts of the broader web. At least the Sonoma Creek riparian setback was widened in the specific plan to 100 feet from each bank. As minimally adequate as that is, it is better than that 50 feet on each side of Hill/Mill Creek.

Riparian corridors provide habitat, access to water, transit corridors, protection from humans and transportation interactions, and much more. At-risk salmonids and frogs live in the creeks. Knowing where the boundaries and setbacks are, and what buildings and roads or paths if any fall within those boundaries, is crucial to protecting those spaces. And as far as I can tell no specific mapping has been done of those areas.

I am also concerned that leaving protection of riparian corridors to the eventual developers of the developmental center campus subjects them to serious risk. Developers are not experts at habitat restoration, stream rehabilitation, wildlife movement or salmonid migrations. Groundwater restoration, stream bank erosion control and protection from water pollution caused

by runoff from surrounding roads, landscaping and construction need to be addressed among other potential problems.

Could federal or state Fish and Wildlife create a plan for protecting the corridors? I know they are underfunded and not necessarily the optimal overseer, but they might engage due to the recovering salmonid population in Sonoma Valley creeks. Alternatively, the county open space district, Sonoma Land Trust or Sonoma Ecology Center might be persuaded to acquire an interest in the corridors to ensure oversight through an open space preserve or outright ownership.

I fear if this matter isn't addressed early in the process of development it might be too late to solve. Plus, I'd like to relieve the developers of any temptation to bargain away the riparian corridor protections.

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