

Time for a reset on SDC plan



The main building at the Sonoma Developmental Center. (ROBBI PENGELLY / Sonoma Index-Tribune)

There's nothing ambiguous in Judge Bradford DeMeo's shredding of a thick environmental impact report supporting building plans for the Sonoma Developmental Center site near Glen Ellen.

Using unusually blunt language for a legal ruling, DeMeo described aspects of the

2,500-page document approved in December 2022 by the Board of Supervisors as “toothless,” “vague” and “limited to hopeful intentions.”

Regarding a finding that preserving historic structures isn’t feasible, the judge concluded the county-commissioned report was “wholly devoid” of supporting evidence.

In a nearly complete repudiation, he also said the report failed to clearly define the amount of housing allowed, address the effects of a nearby building project or account for biological resources and wildlife on the 945-acre property.

DeMeo’s ruling is subject to appeal, but reopening the planning process now would be a more prudent strategy than spending more time and money on protracted litigation that isn’t likely to resolve sharp disagreements over appropriate redevelopment of a prize piece of publicly owned land.

For 130 years, the Sonoma Developmental Center was a refuge for some of the state’s most vulnerable residents, such as people with severe brain injuries or intellectual disabilities. When the state closed the center in 2018 — a complex of aging buildings surrounded by hundreds of acres of scenic open space — Sonoma County was given a rare opportunity.

The state General Services Department auctions surplus property to the top bidder. This time, however, Sonoma County was given three years to craft a development plan for the site before the state offered the property for sale. The goal was to identify a potential path for prospective buyers.

Reconciling competing visions for the property was never going to be simple, and as the litigation shows, there hasn’t been much progress.

In 2019, at about the same time the state deferred the sale, Gov. Gavin Newsom issued an executive order to make excess state land available for affordable housing. Sonoma County also has a legal mandate to facilitate affordable housing development, and the Glen Ellen site offered an obvious opportunity. The site plan approved by the supervisors envisions at least 600 homes at the core of the property, with hundreds of acres of surrounding land preserved as open space.

Glen Ellen residents, many of whom were forced from their homes by wildfires in 2017 and 2019, pressed for about 450 housing units, contending that two-lane roads in the valley already are inadequate for mass evacuations. Environmental groups, meanwhile, warned that the county plan

wouldn't protect creeks and wildlife corridors crossing the property, and urged preservation of some existing buildings to reduce waste and consumption of resources.

The lawsuit challenging the site plan and environmental report landed less than a month after their approval by county supervisors. Three months later, the state agreed to sell the land to two development companies, which are proposing 930 units, citing state laws that provide density bonuses for building affordable housing.

DeMeo's ruling offers an opportunity to reset a process that has veered from its original goal. Instead of extending the fight over the environmental impact report in an appellate court, reconvene the competing stakeholders to seek a compromise that provides badly needed affordable housing in the Sonoma Valley and preserves environmental resources without causing undue burden for existing residents.