

New film 'Small is Beautiful' focuses on future of Sonoma Developmental Center

Carolyn M. Scott's film will be screened July 14 at Sebastiani Theatre, followed by a panel discussion

By DANIEL JOHNSON

INDEX-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

After moving from Santa Rosa to Sonoma in June 2023, award-winning filmmaker and environmental educator Carolyn M. Scott heard about plans for use of the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) campus, which had closed more than four years earlier.

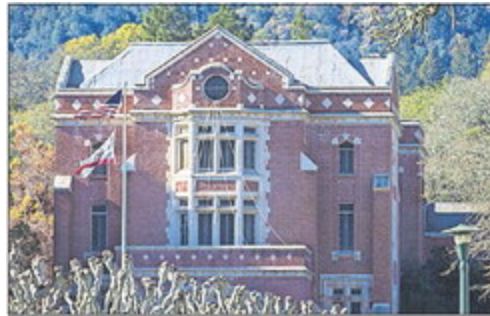
“I first learned about the SDC development by engaging with locals who had made comments on the NextDoor platform,” Scott said. “I was intrigued and wanted to know more. I interviewed many residents to understand their perspectives and got educated real fast.”

Eventually, her efforts generated the 25-minute film, “Small is Beautiful,” which will be shown on Sunday, July

14, at 2 p.m. at Sebastiani Theatre in Sonoma. The screening is sponsored by Sonoma Valley Next 100 and Praxis Peace Institute in Sonoma and includes a panel discussion.

“The film, ‘Small is Beautiful’ — titled after the E.F. Schumacher book that advocates for small and appropriate technologies as well

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The main building at Sonoma Developmental Center in Eldridge. “Small is Beautiful,” Carolyn M. Scott's film about the future of the center, will be screened at Sebastiani Theatre on July 14.

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as polices and communities that are superior alternatives to the ‘bigger is better’ ethos — underscores the need for communities to engage deeply with their environment,” Scott said. “We need to know the lands we live on — to cultivate them and share this resource with care and love.”

During her initial conversations, Scott learned that the State of California, which owns the land in Eldridge that includes the SDC, is attempting to sell the 200-acre core campus.

In October 2023, Scott met Gilroy, who inspired her to work on a film project about the SDC situation.

of this particular region.

“However, Rogal already submitted another plan on July 2, so the fight is far from over. And we have to look at the big picture of these mandates overriding all environmental laws and local controls.”

Rogal said that the development group has not submitted a full proposal for the SDC site yet, adding that when it is completed, the California Environmental Quality Act review process will then be done.

The Sonoma Valley Next 100 Years Project released a proposal in September 2022 that is founded on seven principles: Keep the land at SDC in public ownership in perpetuity; make sure the local community has a strong say in the future of the land; protect the open space and expand the wildlife and riparian corridors; and choose a scale of development that is compatible with the rural character of Sonoma Valley.

“It had its fair share of false starts,” Scott said. “I nearly gave up a couple of times due to the lack of support and finding local filmmakers to collaborate with.”

“Fortunately, the nonprofits involved in this struggle connected me with incredibly knowledgeable interviewees, and that’s when things started to take shape.”

Jim Coddington, a local drone cinematographer, provided a big boost.

“He generously offered his expertise pro bono, helping to realize my vision of capturing the enchanting beauty of the Valley of the Moon,” Scott said. “My mission was to make the film *beautiful* — to show what is at stake.”

“Jim perfectly captured the sacredness of our region. And others came to play with me as I enticed folk to get involved, based on the growing footage we were capturing.”

The 1,640-acre property is one of the most important wildlife corridors in the Bay Area and is part of a devoted rural community that treasures its ecological, recreational and recreational assets.

In 1884, Francis H. Bentley and Julia M.

Judah founded a small school for children with disabilities, including their own, in Vallejo. The school later moved to Santa Clara and in 1889, the State of California began operating the school and purchased the land in Sonoma Valley to become its permanent home.

Services at the site expanded over the years, which is reflected in its name changes to Sonoma State Home Hospital in 1883, Sonoma State Home in 1909, Sonoma State Hospital in 1953 and Sonoma Developmental Center in 1986.

During its early history, forced sterilization was a routine practice and through the years, several instances of sexual assault and abuse occurred. But the SDC became a refuge for vulnerable and devalued people by housing, healing and empowering them. The SDC became part of the community for its life-affirming treatment of residents and caregivers — and it remains beloved by many Sonoma Valley residents.

So, when Permit Sonoma — the county’s land planning and development agency — prepared a plan for SDC

“I find the proposal to be profound and comprehensive,” Scott said. “It represents a collaborative effort by the community aimed at preserving regional biodiversity while responsibly planning for the future of the land.”

In “Small is Beautiful,” she explores the challenges facing the rural Sonoma Valley community as it battles urban sprawl and destruction of the wildlife corridor.

“The documentary transitions seamlessly from the local to the statewide perspective, shedding light on new legislations’ sweeping impacts across California,” she said. “Disguised as ‘affordable’ housing mandates, these new laws bypass local authority and circumvent environmental and land use regulations.”

Scott said that the film raises important questions, such as, “Why are environmental laws circumvented to facilitate luxury housing developments?”

“The film advocates for the principles of decentralization and local empowerment, essential for building resilient communities capable of managing their own lands and resources,” she said. “Also, the idea of keeping things small, decentralized and local is central to the idea of building resilient communities that are empowered to manage their own lands and resources, not driven by outside entities that have zero knowledge of the people and lands they live on.”

Many of Scott’s other films have focused on environmental issues. She received an Emmy nomination for “Texas Gold,” a documentary film released in 2005 that told the story of Diane West, a fourth-generation Texas fisherwoman who was fighting the giants of the petrochemical industry in Lavac Bay, Texas.

“I became passionate about environmental issues a long time ago, back when I was young,” she said. “Growing up in San Francisco and Pacifica, I developed a deep care for nature from an early age. I became aware of the myriad challenges our planet faces, and I’ve wanted to take action to address them for as long as I can remember.” *Reach the reporter, Dan Johnson, at daniel.johnson@sonomanews.com.*

that proposed 1,000 housing units on the core campus, many community members expressed outrage. The agency responded by reducing the number of units to 620, along with a luxury hotel.

In March 2023, the California Department of General Services selected Napa-based developer Keith Rogal and his partner, the Grupe Company, to lead a \$100 million project to redevelop the site. These developers then found a loophole that allowed the housing total to increase to a minimum of 930 units.

A coalition of Sonoma Valley citizens groups objected to the plan and filed a lawsuit. After reviewing the lawsuit, in April 2024 Sonoma County Superior Court Judge Bradford De-Meo ruled that the county had violated the California Environmental Quality Act by failing to clearly define the number of housing units allowed; respond to community concerns in the draft environmental impact report (EIR); adequately assess impacts on biological resources and wildlife evacuation; and address the cumulative impact of a project planned at neighboring Hanna Center.

“I was thrilled and delighted to read the judge’s ruling,” Scott said. “Bravo DeMeo! He clearly recognized the duplicity and illegalities in that EIR, and he recognized the need for a plan that actually addresses the environmental sensitivities



Award-winning filmmaker Carolyn M. Scott’s new film, “Small is Beautiful,” which focuses on the future of Sonoma Developmental Center, will be screened at Sebastiani Theatre on July 14.

CAROLYN M. SCOTT



The Sonoma Developmental Center in Eldridge.

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