

# Rebuked by judge, firm gets do-over

County OKs fresh \$900K deal to update Glen Ellen redevelopment project



The main building at the Sonoma Developmental Center in Eldridge. The building is currently not in use.



A walker on the grounds of the Sonoma Developmental Center. (Robbi Pengelly / Index-Tribune)





Sonoma locals pedal uphill on Orchard Road in the wilderness area behind Sonoma Developmental Center. (Alvin Jornada / Press Democrat file)

BY PHIL BARBER THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

In April 2024, a Superior Court judge tore into Sonoma County's environmental report on the redevelopment of the Sonoma Developmental Center campus in Glen Ellen.

Judge Bradford DeMeo called the policies outlined in the \$1.77 million environmental impact report and Specific Plan "vague, open-ended, and devoid of any clear mandatory requirements or performance standards."

On Tuesday, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors unanimously agreed to spend more than \$900,000 to upgrade the documents in the hopes of pushing forward on a development plan that could add 1,000 homes to Sonoma Valley.

Selected for the job is Dyett and Bhatia, the Oakland-based urban planning firm that created the original Specific Plan and EIR, the ones DeMeo savaged.

The contract has a lifespan of two years.

The move isn't sitting well with some valley residents.

"Clearly, there's many in the community who think (Dyett and Bhatia) screwed it up royally in the beginning," Norman Gilroy, a leader of the group Sonoma Valley Next 100, told The Press Democrat. "I think they bought into a line of thinking that said reuse of the existing buildings is not financially feasible, so they had to go for the whole nine yards.

"I think they are probably still invested in that approach. And almost anything they do will be a patch job on the original, to try to justify that position."

County planners insist Dyett and Bhatia was the logical choice, because of the detailed research the company already has done on the historic site. As the staff report submitted to the supervisors said, the time required to bring a new firm up to "a conversational level with the project would represent significant delays and cost."

For those reasons, Permit Sonoma requested using a "sole source waiver" to select the Oakland firm, rather than opening up the work to competitive bids.

Entering into a competitive bidding competition for the planning documents might have added four months to the process, and likely wouldn't have widened the pool of applicants, according to Permit Sonoma Director Tennis Wick.

"When you have this kind of prior experience from one of the competitors, it significantly dampens the number and quality of proposals you'll get," Wick told The Press Democrat, emphasizing his 45 years of experience in the field. "Because others would see Dyett and Bhatia already have substantial knowledge. It takes tens of thousands of dollars just to put a proposal together. I don't think anyone would be willing to take on that risk knowing Dyett and Bhatia has such a head start."

As Wick noted in addressing the supervisors, the circumstances have changed since the last time Permit Sonoma accepted planning documents from Dyett and Bhatia. Because those reports came before the county had approved the application of Eldridge Renewal — the builders selected by the state Department of General Services to redevelop SDC — they were written to guide something fairly conceptual.

Recently, Permit Sonoma deemed Eldridge Renewal's application, the company's fourth attempt, complete.

"Now we have a development proposal," Wick told The Press Democrat. "That requires a greater and more specific level of environmental review."

To that end, the new agreement with Dyett and Bhatia identifies a number of subcontractors with targeted expertise. They include Fehr and Peers (which will study transportation data), CAS Safety Consulting (wildfire evacuations), WRA Inc. (biological resources), Page & Turnbull (historic resources), Far Western (archaeology), Van Meter Williams Pollack (architecture) and Charles M Salter Associates (noise).

"So it's a different team than we had before, that has specialty here in the North Bay and are better attuned to project-specific work," Wick told the supervisors.

Of those many elements, it's the evacuation study that may be tracked most closely by residents.

In Dyett and Bhatia's original EIR, traffic consultant Kittelson & Associates estimated that evacuation times — mostly along Arnold Drive — would increase by 15 seconds during a fire event, bringing the total time needed to escape harm's way to roughly 90 seconds.

That calculation was derided by many community members, and it failed to sway DeMeo, who later ordered the supervisors to void certification of the Specific Plan and EIR last December, effectively pausing the project.

"There is no information or explanation as to ... how the analysis calculated the travel times for evacuation scenarios," he wrote in his judgment.

Building on that uncertainty, the grassroots Valley of the Moon Alliance commissioned its own independent study, conducted by KLD Associates. That report, released Feb. 10, estimated evacuation times under current conditions at 171 minutes, following a two-hour emergency-notice period. If

the SDC redevelopment plans proceeds as outlined, that time could increase to 285 minutes, or nearly five hours, according to KLD Associates.

One question Supervisor Rebecca Hermosillo had for Wick on Tuesday: What opportunities will there be for community input on this process?

That has been a major sore spot for many Sonoma Valley residents. At numerous in-person forums and online presentations over the past several years, the bulk of public comment has called for scaled-down development at the former institution for Californians with developmental disabilities. The people making those comments felt ignored when the county eventually ratified a plan allowing 1,000 or more units of housing, plus a hotel.

Moving forward, Wick said, the county will first issue a notice of preparation, then release a draft document that opens a window for public comment. The builder's remedy mechanism, which Eldridge Renewal has successfully invoked, allows for five public hearings after that.

Ultimately, the documents would go to the Sonoma County Planning Commission, and back to the board of supervisors for certification.

In a follow-up interview with The Press Democrat, Hermosillo said that if she'd had "maybe another month" under her belt — she assumed office in January — she would have pushed for the item to be noticed for the board's regular calendar Tuesday, rather than placed on the consent calendar, which requires no in-chambers discussion.

Sensing the degree of public concern, the supervisors moved it to the regular calendar anyway.

"I know what a significant project this is," Hermosillo said. "I've been at those meetings when I was in Congressman Thompson's office. It was with other facilitators running the meetings. They'd tell people, 'Great idea,' then they included none of it. We're going to do what we can to make sure people's comments are taken seriously."

Dyett and Bhatia received \$1.77 million for the work they did on the original Specific Plan and EIR for the 180-acre core campus. Those were certified by the county in December 2022. Now the company stands to reap as much as another \$913,000.

The Permit Sonoma staff report noted that most of the additional money, about \$680,000, will come from a fund the state had set aside for this

redevelopment project, and had not yet been used. Anything beyond that, Wick said, will be paid by Eldridge Renewal.

“Exactly how it happens, we’re sorting out,” he said. “But the money will come from the state fund and it will come from the applicants. It will not come from the county.”

Still, considering DeMeo’s rebuke of Dyett and Bhatia’s first attempt to evaluate the project’s impacts, re-upping with the same firm strikes some observers as throwing good money after bad.

“You hired Dyett and Bhatia. They botched it,” Laurie Pyle, who lives in Glen Ellen, said during public comment at Tuesday’s meeting. “Now you want to hire the same firm to do it again. Why? It would be like taking your car to the very same mechanic who failed to fix it the first time, expecting a different outcome. And you all know what that is a sign of.”

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