

The Witching Hour: More questions than answers at the SDC

By Tracy Salcedo

Sonoma County has once again rejected Eldridge Renewal's project application to redevelop the campus of the former Sonoma Development Center (SDC). The application to build 990 dwellings, a 150-room resort hotel, and more than 100,000 square feet of commercial space remains, in planning parlance, "incomplete."

This latest twist in the road to transformation of the former state hospital — a road that's been clotted with detours and dead ends — comes as no surprise. I've been immersed in the process for nearly a decade now, as both a journalist and an activist, and "incomplete" seems a perfect description for this endless progression of hope, despair, and unanswered questions.

When legislators approved the SDC Specific Plan process in 2019, the idea was that we, the community, would chart a visionary course for renewal of what everyone agreed was a spectacular public property. The assumption was that 750 acres of land surrounding the 180-acre campus would be preserved as open space, and the focus of redevelopment would be affordable housing. Three years later, brimming with hope, despair, and unanswered questions, the SDC Specific Plan and its self-mitigating (whatever that means) environmental impact report (EIR) were approved by the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors.

But both plan and EIR fell short of both community expectations and compliance with environmental law. Local activists sued (full disclosure: I'm on the board of Sonoma Mountain Preservation, one of the plaintiffs), and just last month, a Sonoma County Superior Court judge finalized his determination that both the plan and EIR needed a reboot to bring them into compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

Meantime — and I'll do my best to not make you all nauseous as we speed through the bureaucratic hairpins — California's Department of General Services (DGS) selected a preferred developer for the campus: Eldridge Renewal, composed of Rogal and Partners (spearheaded by Keith Rogal) and the Grupe Company. The sale of the property has not, to date, been finalized. About 650 acres of open space were transferred to California State Parks. Another 50 acres in the southeast corner of the property have been, via an opaque process, set aside for a new CalFire headquarters. Sonoma County failed to complete its state-mandated Housing Element on time and, running the yellow light, Eldridge Renewal submitted its project application just in time to take advantage of what's known as the builders' remedy.

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That's the application we're all focused on now. When (and if) deemed complete, it will pave the way for the developer to merge into the redevelopment fast lane.

But Eldridge Renewal hasn't gotten it right yet. Each time it's tried to meet the county's benchmark, it's fallen short. That said, it must be acknowledged that the developer faces significant hurdles, chief among them how it will provide water for the project. Water, as we Californians well know, is precious and contentious.

What about the water?

Despite sitting through interminable hearings and pouring through reams of documentation, I've never seen a definitive description of how water rights on the property, currently held by the state, would be transferred to the developer. Now that the property encompassing both Fern and Suttonfield Lakes, and the springs that feed those reservoirs, has been transferred to State Parks, the question is even more muddled. Who, exactly, holds the

rights? Is it DGS? State Parks? The state Water Resources Control Board? Who makes the transfer? What happens if, after the transfer, the developer walks away or sells a portion of the property to another developer? Do the water rights stay with the land, or do they become a commodity?

And then there's the big-picture question: Is it in the public interest to relinquish those water rights to a private developer, or is there another, better way provide water to the future development?

What about the infrastructure that moves the water? The pipes, pumps, storage tanks, and other facilities that have historically moved water from reservoir to kitchen tap are also now located on State Park land. That infrastructure is old and outdated; I've witnessed failures in the pipeworks firsthand. Will all that infrastructure be vetted for safety, capacity, and compliance with code prior to sale of the property? How will maintenance and replacement be performed? Will those activities be subject to CEQA, to guarantee impacts on parkland and the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor are mitigated? Who will maintain the waterworks when and if the developer moves on?

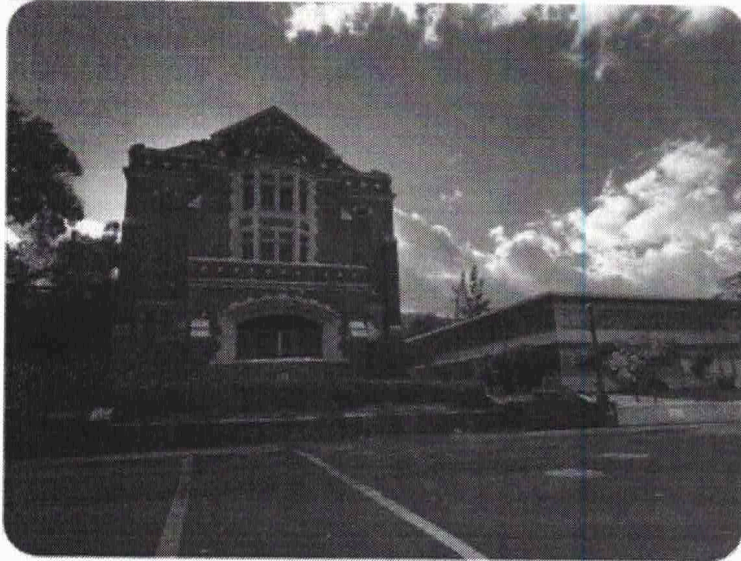
Eldridge Renewal also has indicated that the now-neglected water treatment facility perched in the hills will be recommissioned to support the new development. What will that entail? How will that process, with its attendant demolition and construction, conform to environmental review and protections?

What about the SDC Specific Plan?

The legal challenge to the SDC Specific Plan's EIR was successful, and in its Nov. 7 letter to Eldridge Renewal, Permit Sonoma states it must "decertify the EIR and set aside the Specific Plan and related approvals." While the county has the right to appeal the decision, the letter goes on to say, "the Board has not yet taken action in response to the writ."

The assumption has been that, given Eldridge Renewal's builders' remedy application, the county will not appeal. Putting aside my opinion, which is that planners and politicians should pull up their knickers and comply with the court order, let's focus, instead, on the costs. Three years and \$3 million were earmarked for development of the Specific Plan and environmental review. How do officials justify tossing aside that substantial expenditure of time and money to meet the demands of a developer? Can the county, instead, reject the builders' remedy application outright? There's evidence that

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The Main Building at the Sonoma Developmental Center November 2024. Photo by Paul Goguen

it can, based on the fact that no sound plan for the provision of water exists. Is money available to bring the plan and EIR up to snuff? Folks have asserted that the county returned unspent funds to the state; could those funds

be reallocated to revise the plan and EIR to conform to the judge's order, and not go down as a waste of taxpayers' dollars?

What about the campus?

Throwing up yet another roadblock, the state of California DGS has indicated it won't spend any more money on maintenance of the campus as of July 1, 2025. What does that mean? Are there alternatives? Is this supposed to inspire some kind of action on the part of Sonoma County? The community? Who will be responsible for the campus if DGS walks away, especially if the property hasn't sold and no redevelopment plan is in place?

Who's in charge?

As I've been thinking this through, it's become clear no one's in charge. We are hurtling down the road to redevelopment in a clown car, with everyone's hand on the wheel, pumping the brakes, hitting the gas pedal.

And no one has answers. I realized, as questions circled like bats in the gloaming, that I couldn't just ask Permit Sonoma, or DGS, or our elected officials, or State Parks, or Keith Rogal, for the answers because the issues are so entwined. I had to ask them all.

So, I did. Last week, I sent a slate of questions to all of the above. Some were answered with release of the notice of incompleteness on Nov. 7. So far, except for Permit Sonoma Director Tennis Wick, who referred me to the planning agency's outreach program manager, no one has responded. But that's understandable. Notice was short and there are no easy answers.

What's next? Who decides? What can we do?

Honestly, I'm not sure. But I know the only way we'll get answers is if we keep asking.

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