

What's next for the SDC?

Supervisors ditch plan and EIR to comply with legal ruling, but planning process preserved



By Tracy Salcedo

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, complying with a court mandate, voted unanimously on Dec. 3 to decertify the environmental impact report (EIR) for the SDC Specific Plan and repeal the plan itself, but rejected a third action that would have abandoned the specific planning process for the 180-acre campus of the former Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) altogether.

Permit Sonoma, the county planning agency, had proposed abandoning the process, citing the need to move forward with a separate project submitted by Eldridge Renewal, a development team headed by developer Keith Rogal. The Eldridge Renewal application, which has yet to be deemed “complete” by Permit Sonoma, was submitted under SB 330, known as the “builder’s remedy” legislation, which allows developers to fast-track projects that include affordable housing.

The unanimous vote followed a hearing in which the supervisors, along with community advocates, voiced their frustrations and hopes for the project. The decision also created uncertainties as to how planning for redevelopment of the treasured Glen Ellen property would proceed.

Background

The supervisors approved the SDC Specific Plan and its environmental impact report (EIR) in December 2022, approving construction of up to 750 dwelling units and more than 400,000 square feet of commercial space, including a resort hotel on the former Eldridge campus of a facility serving people with developmental disabilities. The EIR accompanying the plan was designed to be “self-mitigating,” a term that provoked confusion and consternation among com-

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community activists who asserted the scale of the project demanded more comprehensive environmental safeguards.

Sonoma Community Advocates for a Liveable Environment (SCALE) and Sonoma County Tomorrow, a cohort of community advocacy groups, filed suit in early 2023, challenging the EIR’s compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). In spring 2024, Judge Bradford DeMeo issued a scathing ruling that upheld SCALE’s challenge and mandated decertification of the faulty EIR and repeal of the specific plan.

Meantime, in August 2023, Eldridge Renewal, chosen by California’s Department of General Services as the preferred buyer of the campus, filed its builder’s remedy project application, which increased housing density to 930 dwelling units and relocated the proposed hotel to a hilltop adjacent to the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor. The application, which in its latest iteration calls for construction of 990 housing units, has been repeatedly deemed incomplete by Permit Sonoma. The most recent rejection was issued in early November; the developer has 90 days, or until Feb. 16, 2025, to respond.

The hearing

Rather than appeal the judgement, the supervisors followed the court’s mandate, but they balked at tossing aside the community input gathered during the three-year specific planning process. Instead, they decided to marry

the specific plan with the Eldridge Renewal project by creating what District 2 Supervisor David Rabbitt called a “specific plan with a builder’s remedy overlay.”

“[There’s] nothing to stop an applicant from using the [SDC Specific Plan] as a base, with a builder’s remedy overlay, to achieve what they need to achieve,” Rabbitt said.

District 4 Supervisor James Gore focused his comments on the money, pointing out that the state provided the county with \$3 million to develop the SDC Specific Plan and EIR. Scrapping the process, Gore said, essentially meant the county would not produce the “deliverable” required by the enabling legislation.

“What I’m hearing [from an undisclosed source at the state] is that if we scrap the Specific Plan we are going to get a notice from the state asking us to refund [\$2.3M]. That’s what I’m being told,” Gore said, later adding, “Why the hell I would vote to ... jettison a Specific Plan and not complete a product that we signed a contract to create?”

Tennis Wick, director of Permit Sonoma, said the planning agency retains approximately \$700,000 in state funding that could be used to reconcile a redevelopment plan with CEQA. Those funds would be sufficient to “repair” the EIR, he noted.

Supervisor Susan Gorin, whose First District encompasses the site, bemoaned the fact that, to date, the Eldridge Renewal development team, headed by Keith Rogal, had not engaged the community engagement in its planning process.

Gorin was also clearly frustrated with the property owner, the state of California.

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Photo by Paul Goguen

“The state has made an intentional disinvestment from this site for decades, so for them to expect a developer and the county to come up with a financially feasible plan with a decaying infrastructure is just immoral, in my opinion,” she said, adding that infrastructure repairs should not be “dependent on a unit count.”

Follow-up with Eldridge Renewal

Reached via email following the hearing, developer Rogal told the Kenwood Press that the Eldridge Renewal team was “pleased to have the County’s clear direction and will continue working diligently to address questions from County staff and finalize the completion of our application, allowing staff and the public to review our comprehensive complete application. This is a continuation of work of the past months, adding additional details to the plans we filed some time ago.”

Asked how the Eldridge Renewal project, as it currently stands, could be folded into a “Specific Plan with a builder’s remedy overlay,” Rogal said, “The Specific Plan created the framework and guidelines for our proposed project. We anticipate that the majority of the revisions described for the Specific Plan will be around addressing identified deficiencies throughout the EIR process.”

Addressing Supervisor Gorin’s statement about lack of communication with the community, Rogal noted that in creating the project, “we relied on the hundreds of hours of public testimony already on the record, and a database of several thousand comments, along with the full text and supporting studies from the Specific Plan efforts. Once the application is deemed complete, we will embark on a program of outreach throughout the County.”

Next steps

Genevieve Bertone, outreach program manager with Permit Sonoma, explained how the agency will proceed with the planning process given the supervisors’ direction.

“The next step is getting a stable project description so that CEQA can be conducted on both the Specific Plan that was previously adopted and the development application,” she said. “The development application and the Specific Plan must be consistent and must be analyzed together to avoid piecemealing the environmental review. CEQA review can proceed once the development application is complete and the development application and the Specific Plan align.”

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Typically, the cost of a project EIR is borne by the developer, but in this case, as noted by Director Wick in the hearing, \$700,000 in state funding is available to facilitate the process.

“The original Specific Plan, and accompanying EIR, was funded by the State,” explained Fallon Okwuosa, assistant deputy director with the California Department of General Services (DGS), via email. DGS is the state’s real estate agency and is tasked with final disposition of surplus property such as the former SDC. “As the County will be revising and correcting the deficiencies in the environmental reviews for that Specific Plan, we would assume the remaining balance of the funds [will] be used for those purposes.”

“The funds will go towards the plan-related work,” Bertone said. “The County will work with DGS to determine the appropriate expenditure of these funds.”

The timeline remains uncertain. According to Permit Sonoma, pulling together an EIR for a new project — even if it’s based on the existing, flawed EIR — could take as long as a year. DGS has indicated it will cease maintenance and security operations on the SDC site on July 1, 2025, about seven months down the line.

“The 2019 funding for the site was intended to last through June of 2022, which was the targeted completion of the Specific Plan,” Okwuosa said. “These funds will be fully exhausted in June 2025, at which point maintenance and operations will cease until a CEQAcompliant Specific Plan and EIR are complete and the state sells the property.”

Addressing community concerns about limitations on the number of public hearings permitted for the Eldridge Renewal project, given its builder’s remedy status, Bertone explained that the “five-hearing limit applies to all housing development projects, not just those that fall under the builder’s remedy.” The tricky bit will be separating hearings “that are solely on legislative proposals or CEQA,” which do not count toward the limit, from hearings on the project.

“If the hearing limit is exceeded, a project can be deemed approved, so it is important to ensure the County stays within the allowed number,” Bertone said. “It is too early to determine exactly how hearings will be planned for this project at this time. Now that we have direction to continue with the plan, we will assess and

likely consult with the California Department of Housing & Community Development. We will look to maximize opportunities for public comment either way.”

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