

Revised SDC plan stirs anger  
By Phil Barber The Press Democrat

The developers selected by the state to handle design and rebuild of the historic Sonoma Developmental Center campus in Glen Ellen have submitted a revised application to Sonoma County, their fourth attempt to gain approval for a roughly 1,000-unit housing community.

Like previous iterations, the revised application by Eldridge Renewal LLC immediately sparked outrage — this time, based largely on a proposal to tear down the 1897 residence known as Sonoma House to make way for an environmental education center.

“This cannot happen,” the Glen Ellen Historical Society said in an email to its subscribers Saturday. “This valued structure is on the county list of historic buildings and is a treasure. There are no other structures like this on the campus.”

The historical society email included a template its supporters could use to voice their concerns to the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors and Permit Sonoma, the county’s planning and code enforcement division.

It’s the latest flashpoint in an increasingly fractious saga over what’s to become of the 134-year-old campus, a residential treatment center for some of the state’s most developmentally disabled people — and at one time, the county’s largest employer — until its closure at the end of 2018.

The state Department of General Services’ bid to sell the core campus for redevelopment into housing has been hounded by staunch opposition, county concerns and at least two lawsuits.

### **Unexpected ally**

In mounting their ardent opposition to Eldridge Renewal’s plan to demolish Sonoma House, the preservationists swiftly gained an unexpected ally: the Sonoma Ecology Center, which the developers’ application had cited as an example of the kind of organization it would like to see occupy the cleared space.

“This is not anything (Sonoma Ecology Center) asked for, or expected,” Richard Dale, the organization’s executive director, wrote in a public statement, “and I believe it may be a ploy to divide our community.”

The center had no forewarning of the plan to demolish Sonoma House until it received an email from another nonprofit organization, Eldridge for All, on Saturday. “So that note from Richard was completely in response, wanting to correct the misconception that we might have asked for that,” said Caitlin Cornwall, a senior project manager for Sonoma Ecology Center.

The center has never seen itself in opposition to groups like the historical society, she added.

But Keith Rogal, the Napa-based developer who has teamed with Stockton-based Grupe Company to form Eldridge Renewal, called that aspect of the dispute a misunderstanding.

“Neither you, nor anyone at the Sonoma Ecology Center ever suggested in any way that you would want the Sonoma House demolished,” Rogal wrote to Dale in an email. “It was not our intention to suggest that you had.

Rogal’s application referred to “a qualified nonprofit such as the Sonoma Ecology Center.” That was never meant to pinpoint the center as the beneficiary, he insisted, pointing out that the drawings prepared by his team labeled the proposed reuse more generally, as “The Environmental Center.”

But Rogal did not backpedal from his plan to take down Sonoma House.

He noted that when the building was deemed eligible for the National Register, it was based largely on its historical significance — and that its place in history was, in fact, repugnant.

For decades, it was the home of Sonoma State Home Superintendent Fred O. Butler, a committed and active eugenicist who ordered — and in many cases, performed — sterilizations of developmentally disabled teenagers and adults without consent.

“The notion that someone would invest money to restore their luxurious quarters is just anathema to me,” Rogal told The Press Democrat. “And it’s inexplicable why it would be seen as something we’d want to commit resources to.

“That story needs to be told in a proper and a respectful setting, created in consultation with people who were affected. But to treat it as an architectural landmark, to be preserved as a structure, I don’t see the justification for that.”

Since the day they floated their first proposal for SDC, the developers have met with fierce local opposition. Critics have warned of environmental degradation, historical erasure and traffic impacts that could pose a safety risk during wildfire evacuations.

### **990 residential units**

The latest plan calls for 990 residential units — a number boosted by Eldridge Renewal’s use of the “builder’s remedy,” a piece of California legislation that allows developers to increase the size of projects when a local jurisdiction doesn’t have an up-to-date, state-approved blueprint for how it intends to add housing. Sonoma County now has that blueprint, but it didn’t when Rogal’s team first submitted an application.

Other elements of the latest plan are unchanged: 200 of the 990 housing units would be deed-restricted to accommodate lower-income households. The project also seeks a 150-room hotel and 130,000 square feet of commercial, office, research and micro-manufacturing space on the 160-acre core campus, along with a new fire station.

The campus currently includes 61 buildings of varying age and condition. Eldridge Renewal’s application calls for retaining just four of them.

Permit Sonoma will now review the latest Eldridge Renewal application and make a “completeness determination.” The first three attempts were deemed incomplete, prompting requests for correction.

This newest submission is Eldridge Renewal’s response to the county’s previous request for additional information, filed by Permit Sonoma on Nov. 7.

That request asked for a detailed breakdown of affordability levels assigned to specific types of units, and whether they are meant to be purchased or rented; the proposed cost for five “independent living” units meant for residents with developmental disabilities; and clarification of which utility

providers would handle water and sewer services for the campus, in addition to forecasting the fate of Sonoma House.

### **Pushback by Eldridge**

Eldridge Renewal answered every question, but a couple of its responses offered some pushback.

For example, Permit Sonoma had asked for information to help evaluate whether the landscaping plan for SDC is consistent with the county's Tree Protection Ordinance. The developers provided a diagram of tree protection zones, but added that the ordinance "went into effect in April 2024, after the project's SB 330 preliminary application was submitted on Aug. 22, 2023. Thus, it is not applicable to the project."

Tennis Wick, the director of Permit Sonoma, told The Press Democrat his department is "currently reviewing all components of the submittal."

If this application is deemed complete, the public will see a "notice of preparation," where Permit Sonoma defines the project for the purposes of environmental review. If the application is incomplete, the county will kick it back to Eldridge Renewal — as it did the first three applications.

The redevelopment process is now proceeding along two parallel tracks. In December, Sonoma County Superior Court Judge Bradford DeMeo halted the project, ruling that the environmental review commissioned to guide it was inadequate. Meanwhile, Permit Sonoma is moving forward with its own review, to determine whether the Eldridge Renewal proposal conforms to any new specific plan for the site.

The board of supervisors adopted such a plan in 2022, but rescinded it two months ago following an order by DeMeo.

### **New EIR is possible**

Should the county approve the project, a new environmental impact report will be required. Before that, Wick said, "You have to have a stable project description. You can't study two things for the same location simultaneously."

To Sonoma Valley's historical preservationists, the elimination of Sonoma House is a nonstarter.

"It was built for the administrator, the guy in charge of the place," said Jim Shere, a longtime resident and former director of the Glen Ellen Historical Society. "It was his home. It was where he thought about how he went about managing that place. Where people came to meet and discuss these things. There was a family who lived there. So it has a tremendous amount of cultural and intellectual significance."

Shere wants to ensure that history advocates aren't drowned out by other stakeholders. "I appreciate the focus on the environment, on the future," he said. "But you can't do that and ignore the past."

You can reach Phil Barber at 707-521-5263 or [phil.barber@pressdemocrat.com](mailto:phil.barber@pressdemocrat.com). On X (Twitter) @Skinny\_Post.