

The SDC debacle: Now what?

Posted on August 22, 2024 by Sonoma Sun

The campus of the Sonoma Developmental Center is a unique and, we believe, historic resource. And yet, it's being sold like a common spec plot to development interests who plan to demolish most of the structures that define the place, that give it character and that connect the place to the people around it. In place of what is there now will be nearly 1,000 homes, some commercial spaces and a luxury resort hotel.

If that plan proceeds, a community of nearly 3,000 residents – with more than 5,000 cars – along with a transient tourist population of many hundreds, will suddenly be plopped into a near-rural part of Sonoma Valley, just south of the village of Glen Ellen, with its population of roughly 800 people. To call this plan potentially transformational is an understatement; it will irrevocably, permanently and negatively change Sonoma Valley.

Community sentiment is quite lopsided; the proposed plan has little in common with the ideas expressed during the public meetings, workshops and written testimony designed to gather ideas, hopes, and dreams over the course of some eight years. Aspirations for more moderate housing, with most of it geared to lower-income residents, protection for the wildlife corridor, rehabilitation of the viable homes and buildings that now exist, development of low- impact recreational infrastructure and valley- centric educational or ecological research uses dominated public discussion. It appears all that talk, all the hundreds of thousands of dutifully recorded words, amounted to nothing.

Money, it seems, is driving the state's plan for SDC, yet in the scheme of things, it doesn't amount to much. The state's yearly budget is \$267 billion; even if the sales price paid for SDC's campus is \$200 million (the price to be paid remains a guarded mystery), that amounts to merely .00074% of the state's budget. From a county perspective, the development will generate some hotel taxes, charges for water deliveries, and development fees, also crumbs compared with the County's \$2.5 billion budget.

The planning process so far has been a debacle. The county's Specific Plan, along with the project's EIR, have been rejected by the court as woefully inadequate and insufficient. Despite this, the developer recently filed a revised project plan that includes building an even greater number of homes, only a fraction of which will fit the legal definition of affordable. Using a state law called "Builder's Remedy," intended to address the failure of the county to file their housing element by the state deadline, the developer hopes to leapfrog over the usual development regulations. Yet another court hearing will have to sort all that out.

None of this addresses the environmental remediation that will have to be completed. For decades under state operation, SDC improperly disposed of toxic waste produced by its machine shop and other operations as pipes drained untreated water and waste directly onto the ground. The old water treatment plant, now decommissioned, poured poorly treated water into the reservoir. The ultimate cost of remediation is unknown.

What's also unknown at this time is the selling price of SDC to the developer, which strikes us as just plain crazy. How is the Sonoma Valley community able to develop viable alternatives when the selling price has not even been disclosed? The consulting firm

hired by the county to develop the massively deficient and hopelessly non-specific “Specific Plan” predicated that plan on the need to sell the property to a developer with deep pockets and access to lots of borrowed capital. The result smells like either an inside deal, or grossly simple incompetence and ordinary greed.

We like Sonoma Valley Next100’s plan, which includes creation of a public district that would own the SDC campus and regulate its incremental development step-by-cautious step into the future. Rehabilitating existing buildings seems ecologically and economically better than a demolition plan that sends them to a landfill. Creating housing that’s affordable and modest in number also appeals to us. The last thing we need is another luxury hotel, let alone one plopped close by Sonoma Creek and the wildlife corridor.

Sonoma Valley Sun Editorial Board