

Community sentiment about the proposed SDC development heats up

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The proposal to transform the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) near Glen Ellen into a suburban subdivision with more than 960 homes, 400,000 sq. ft. of commercial space and a resort hotel, remains in limbo, but opposition from the Sonoma Valley community and regional organizations is growing.

After a Sonoma County Superior Court judge emphatically rejected the Specific Plan approved by the County's planning department, along with the plan's Environmental Impact Report, as woefully deficient, the developer partnership chosen by the State promptly filed an amended application under the State's "Builders Remedy" regulation which, if upheld as valid by the County of Sonoma, may allow the project to move forward despite the court's ruling.

The Builder's Remedy is a law passed by the State Legislature in response to California's acute housing shortage. It provides that, in jurisdictions where no legally mandated housing plan has been filed by a set deadline, developers can apply for the remedy, which suspends most housing construction zoning requirements. The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors missed the 2023 deadline for a revised General Plan Housing Element by about a day and developer Keith Rogal promptly filed his application. Rogal heads Rogal & Partners which, with co-developer The Grupe Company, was awarded the right to develop the SDC campus. That right, which presumably includes purchase of the 180-acre property, is still shrouded in secrecy. Terms of the State's agreement with Rogal have not been released and there is no public record of the price Rogal has agreed to pay. Nor is there any public information about the cost of mitigating the toxic contamination said to affect much of the campus infrastructure, including asbestos and lead paint.

Local impacts driving public concern and growing opposition to the Rogal plan include the disruption of Sonoma Valley with a projected new population on the site of nearly 2,400 people, dwarfing the population of Glen Ellen's approximately 800 residents, and clogging the only through road – two-lane Arnold Drive – with the estimated 3,000-to-4,000 vehicles those new residents would own.

How and how quickly those new residents would be able to evacuate the site in the event of another wildfire is unknown because neither the County planning department, nor Rogal, has presented a credible evacuation plan. Two prior wildfires in 2017 and 2019 caused massive evacuations and partial gridlock in Sonoma Valley.

And overshadowing these concerns is the vulnerability of a crucial wildlife corridor connecting forested land stretching all the way to the coast, to the south and west, and to the Mayacamas Mountain range, and additional wildlands beyond, to the north and east.

Opposition to this potential scenario has coalesced in a number of citizen groups, including The Next 100 Sonoma Valley, which, in collaboration with the Glen Ellen Historical Society is orchestrating creation of a special district that would be capable of assuming control of the property and managing a smaller, slower, locally-controlled development plan.

The first step in that process has been completed with collection of approximately 1,100 petition signatures of residents in the proposed district footprint. Some 850 signatures are required to move the district application forward, which ultimately requires a public vote, and approval from regional bodies and the Legislature.

The Next 100 recently held two sold-out public showings of the documentary film *Small is Beautiful* at the Sebastiani Theatre, attracting some 600 local citizens. The film focuses on SDC as an example of how local control over crucial land use decisions is increasingly being taken out of local hands. The Sonoma Land Trust has also become activated, along with a coalition of groups, uniting around conservation priorities and protection of the wildlife corridor that runs through the SDC property.

Content on the Sonoma Land Trust website states that protection of the wildlife corridor and its natural resources needs to be a requirement of any development. According to the Land Trust, “The design, siting, acquisition, planning, and construction of the facilities and related infrastructure (must) conserve and protect to the greatest extent feasible the habitat, open space, and wildlife resources of the area within the former Sonoma Developmental Center property that is designated as a Habitat Connectivity Corridor and Community Separator in the Sonoma County General Plan.”

That level of protection would appear to be difficult if not impossible given the density of housing planned for the property. Sonoma Creek, the Valley’s largest watershed, passes through the campus and the Rogal development plan would place at least 73 single family homes along both banks of the creek, with another 35 larger “courtyard” homes situated adjacent to Hill Creek, an important tributary and wildlife passageway.

Underscoring the importance of the wildlife corridor, a Land Trust analysis states, “Protecting the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor will require preventing further development especially in the northern portion of the SDC; as well as reduction in traffic speeds, artificial lighting, invasive species and domestic animal control, limiting human access, and a move toward wildlife friendly fencing throughout the corridor.”

At present, the Builder’s Remedy-revised development proposal by the Rogal group is awaiting a determination of completion by the County planning department. That decision is expected by sometime in October.

Meanwhile, Norman Gilroy, a retired architect and land use planner who co-leads The Next 100, submitted a letter to County planning director Tennis Wick in July requesting a “determination of disapproval” for the Rogal Builder’s Remedy application. Gilroy’s request was based on a section of the law that suspends the Builder’s Remedy on land zoned for agriculture or resource preservation and is surrounded on at least two sides by land being used for those purposes. Gilroy asserts that exception perfectly describes the SDC land in question. At press time Wick had not responded to Gilroy’s request.

