

Redevelopment Proposal for SDC Campus in Legal Limbo

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The developers chosen by the State of California to purchase the 180-acre Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) campus faced a major legal challenge earlier this year. The Sonoma County Superior Court ruled in SCALE vs. The County of Sonoma (<https://scaledownsdsc.org/news>) that the Board of Supervisors violated the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) when they approved the SDC Specific Plan (<https://share.sonoma-county.org/link/Bq8VSU9wCPA/REM%20SDC%20Specific%20Plan-ADOPTED.pdf>) in December 2022. In a sweeping ruling overturning the Specific Plan and associated Environmental Impact Report (EIR), Judge Bradford DeMeo found that the “purported mitigation measures in the Plan are, as a whole, ineffective, vague, and devoid of any semblance of performance standards in violation of CEQA.”

As reported in the April 2023 Transform SDC article (<https://transformsdc.com/2023/04/03/dgs-made-their-decision-4-3-23/>), the California Department of General Services chose Keith Rogal and Grupe Homes as the “selected buyer” for the redevelopment of the SDC campus. Promises of early community engagement were never realized as Rogal/Grupe filed a surprise application with Sonoma County in August 2023 that proposed a housing, hotel, and mixed-use development that far exceeded the 630 homes contemplated in the Specific Plan. As reported in an August 23, 2023 article in the Santa Rosa Press-Democrat article (<https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/a-new-wrinkle->

in-bid-to-redevelop-sonoma-development-center-site-came-out/), the developers used a “newish interpretation of California law (SB 330 (https://scag.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/senate_bill_330_and_senate_bill_8_-_summary_of_housing_crisis_act_of_2019.pdf?1667861006)) that allows developers to skirt local zoning ordinances and specific plans when a local jurisdiction doesn’t have a state-approved housing element” to propose over 930 homes for the environmentally-sensitive SDC site.

As Supervisor Susan Gorin said in the article, “I was absolutely blindsided, and Permit Sonoma was as well,” referring to the county’s planning and building agency. “It came in at the very last minute. I felt comfortable about Keith Rogal and Grupe, and how they were engaging the community. And this came out of nowhere.” Keith Rogal promised that “Six months from now, we will submit a full planning application that will have a lot more detail,” he said. “Along the way, starting very soon, we want to be getting lots of input and feedback, and we expect to improve and refine what we’re doing.”

The full application (<https://share.sonoma-county.org/link/2Au7Nbcc7AY/>) was submitted by Rogal/Grupe to Permit Sonoma in February 2024 with none of the promised public input, dialogue or refinements. In March, Permit Sonoma found the submittal incomplete (https://share.sonoma-county.org/link/VQDOX1D1_ZY/PLP24-0005%20Completeness%20Review%20Letter%203-15-2024.pdf) with disagreements over the number of affordable units proposed, the placement of a hotel in the northwest corner of the campus along the wildlife corridor, the overreliance on single-family detached dwellings, and underutilization of housing types for middle-class buyers. Under the name ‘Eldridge Renewal,’ the developers resubmitted the application in June with an even higher housing count of over 960 homes, only to have it rejected again a month later as incomplete (<https://scaledownsd.org/news>). The County found numerous shortcomings in the application, including a lack of sufficient detail on the placement and architectural design of the homes, no open space framework, not enough information on water supply and wastewater treatment, and numerous other deficiencies. Rogal/Grupe have 90 days to resubmit the application for a third round of review.

What does the April 2024 Superior Court ruling mean for the future redevelopment of SDC? Without an approved Specific Plan for the property, the developers have no underlying authority or Programmatic EIR to rely upon to determine what level of development is permitted, and what mitigation may be required to reduce significant environmental impacts. Even though the court

overturned the Specific Plan, Rogal/Grupe can still legally proceed with their application for just the campus development. This will require a very detailed Project EIR, which will have none of the procedural advantages of using the Specific Plan as a reference point. Because the application falls under the auspices of SB 330, which streamlines approval for development to address California's critical housing shortage, Permit Sonoma explained that while public hearings will be required before the project is reviewed, "there can be a maximum of five for a project like this, so none are being scheduled until the application is complete."

As we await Judge DeMeo's final published ruling, it remains to be seen when or if the Rogal/Grupe development proposal will be able to meet Permit Sonoma's application completeness requirements.

Sonoma Developmental Center, Transform SDC Project

SDC  SDC SPECIFIC PLAN  SONOMA
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