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POSTED ON DECEMBER 15, 2021

## DECEMBER 15, 2021 - Another alternative for the future of the Sonoma Developmental Center

A question of scale, a matter of trust



The administration building at the SDC. Photo by Paul Goguen

DECEMBER 15, 2021

By Christian Kallen

Glen Ellen residents have struggled to find comfort in the three alternatives presented by the county's consultant for redevelopment of the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) — alternatives that all include substantial increases in housing density, a commercial hotel, and the obligation to pay for over \$100 million in site rehabilitation due to a historical lack of maintenance. If the community feels its role in deciding the SDC's future seems at risk, Arthur Dawson thinks he may have found an opening to reclaim that role.

"I've got a framework that I'm working with that I think is going to help this whole Eldridge transition," said Dawson at the most recent Glen Ellen Forum meeting, on Dec. 6. The Warm Springs Road resident serves as chair of the North Sonoma Valley Municipal Advisory Council (NSVMAC), which is scheduled to meet Dec. 15 to craft a response to the three proposed development plans.

In present plans for the disposition of the SDC property, all 950 acres of it — but with special attention to the 180-acre core campus — would probably be sold to a developer to build out the county's chosen "specific plan" vision, prioritizing housing and open space protection, according to Bradley Dunn of Permit Sonoma. But if the state rejects the county plan for whatever reason, it could "program the land use as they see fit, including leasing it for

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development without county oversight.” The alternatives presented by the county’s consultants, Dyett & Bhatia, all hinge on eventual transfer of the site to a “master developer” operating in accordance with the county’s specific plan.

Dawson’s idea is to take another path: Instead of a sale to a private developer, the state should consider a trust, or perhaps two, one for the open space and one for the core campus. A trust is a nonprofit organization that owns and manages land, the prime local example being the Sonoma Land Trust (SLT). Indeed, the SLT might seem a logical trustee for the 765 acres of open space surrounding the core campus, with natural parklands abutting Jack London State Historic Park and including the “wildlife corridor” connecting Sonoma Mountain with the Mayacamas.

But Eamon O’Byrne, the executive director of the SLT, was very cautious about being able to spearhead such a settlement. “We are a pretty standard nonprofit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) charitable organization, subject to California nonprofit laws, not a trust in the old-fashioned way,” he said.

For the campus itself, another type of trust would be called for, rather than a land management trust. O’Byrne, and Permit Sonoma’s policy manager Bradley Dunn both pointed out that the oft-cited Presidio Trust model is inappropriate for the SDC. The Presidio is federal land and required national legislation and support to create the Presidio of San Francisco National Park (which, not coincidentally, is in Rep. Nancy Pelosi’s district), and the Presidio Trust that supports it.

“SDC is not the Presidio in so many ways, I think it’s probably unhelpful to throw around that model,” said O’Byrne. “Not to say a trust in some [form] couldn’t work, but I think it would be something that would specifically be created for the needs of SDC. What we love about the idea is the public involvement and continued oversight of that site.”

Permit Sonoma’s Dunn repeatedly stressed that the final decision was up to the state. “The state is going to dispose of this facility the way the state sees fit,” he said, he later clarified that Permit Sonoma is not a part of the decision about whether the state will sell the property to a trust or any other entity.

“That would be for the state to decide,” he told the Kenwood Press. “At the end of the day, we’re programming the land use; we’re not building this and we’re not selling it.”

Dawson thinks he’s found the key to changing the state’s mind about the scale of development the core campus faces. Dawson focused on Permit Sonoma’s 2019 Request for Proposals (RFP) for the project, which reads in part, “the Specific Plan must be compatible in scale with the surrounding community, and consistent with State, County, and community goals.”

“Glen Ellen’s rural quality is a fundamental quality of our community,” said Dawson. Yet the number of housing units proposed in all three scenarios far exceeds a rural community’s scale, instead tipping any proposed core development into an urban cluster definition of more than 2,500 people, but fewer than 50,000. Dawson bases his argument on U.S. Census definitions of rural and urban, pointing out that the current population density of the areas surrounding the SDC campus, including Glen Ellen, is far below the census’s urban cluster threshold.

Hence, developments of the scales presented in the three alternatives would clearly violate one of the foundational assumptions of the SDC Specific Plan, that development must be “compatible in scale with the surrounding community,” according to Dawson. The current density of the Arnold corridor in Glen Ellen from Madrone to the GE Firehouse is about 280 housing units (HUs) per square mile. The census is currently considering a new definition of “urban places” as those with 385 HUs or more per square mile. The density of the three alternatives proposed all exceed 600 units per square mile.

Dawson’s framing of the urban/ rural conflict, which he is scheduled to present at the Dec. 15 NSVMAC meeting, might be up against the clock — a final decision on a specific plan is expected early in 2022. But Dawson hopes the upcoming MAC meeting will help focus the greater community on the options still available to allow the SDC to honor its past while working toward its future.



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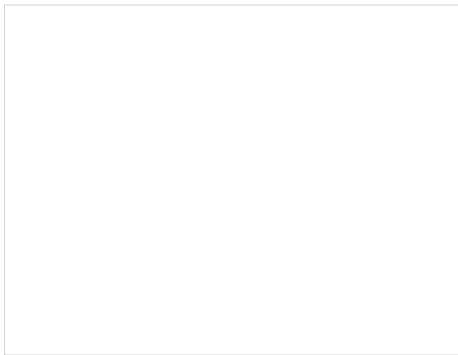
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The biggest factor that impacts any specific plan is the assumption, or requirement, that the final proposal must accommodate \$100 million in repairs to the infrastructure of the SDC, including historic restoration of the expansive Main Building.

“In order for the county to meet its obligation under state law, we have to create an economically suitable plan,” said Dunn. “[This] means we essentially have to come up with \$100 million worth of value to pay for those costs.”

O’Byrne is among those arguing this deferred maintenance at the SDC is the state’s responsibility, as the property was under the state’s direct management through the state Department of Developmental Services as the infrastructure deteriorated, including the water system and other utilities. The Main Building alone is expected to cost between \$17 million and \$30 million to repair. O’Byrne argues that with a current large budget surplus, the state should bear the burden of these repairs — not the developer that ends up with the property.

“If there were ever a year when the state could redo the economic numbers, or the cleanup, this year and the next year are the time to do this,” said O’Byrne.



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*The administration building at the SDC. Photo by Paul Goguen*

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