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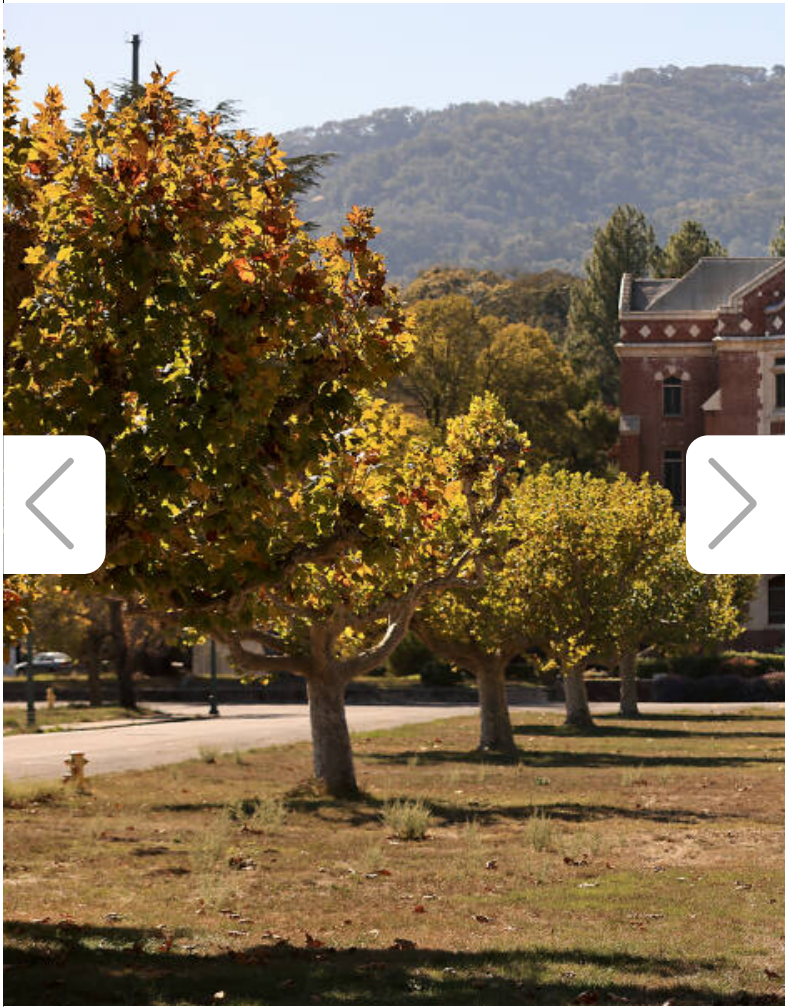
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At the Sonoma Developmental Center, Wednesday, Oct. 19, 2022, in Glen Ellen, a Northern California National Guard 95th Civil Support Team member walks across the median of the campus, during a simulated disaster exercise. (Kent Porter/The Press Democrat) 2022

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October 19, 2022, 9:25AM | Updated 1 hour ago

Sonoma County's planning department has released the final environmental impact report for the long-debated plan meant to guide growth and open space protection at the Sonoma Developmental Center.

The future of the shuttered state campus in Eldridge is seen as pivotal to the future of the surrounding region in Sonoma Valley, where it was once the largest employer.

The final environmental report added protections for open space and a wildlife corridor that runs across the Valley, bowing to concerns raised by conservationists about the impact of redevelopment on sensitive habitat.

The county has also spelled out new mandates for developers, who would be required to build affordable housing at the same time as market-rate homes.

Approval of the site plan and environmental impact report by the Board of Supervisors would advance a transformation of the bucolic campus, which dates back to the early 1890s as the state's largest residential care center for severely developmentally disabled people.

Under a disputed move in 2015 by then-Gov. Jerry Brown, it was closed by the state four years

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spearheaded a process to re-imagine the site's purpose, taking into account its storied past, collection of historic and decaying buildings and beloved landscape, encompassing 945 acres.

The development plan, one of several visions for the campus, calls for 1,000 new units of housing and preservation of 700 acres of open space on the property.

Hannah Perot, a member of the Springs Municipal Advisory Council, said the construction of affordable housing and "missing middle" housing is key to supporting the next generation of Sonoma Valley residents.

"62.5% of the project will be either below market rate or reserved for people making between 120% to 160% of Sonoma County's area median income," Perot said. "To me, I see this as a big win for the normal middle class people who used to make up Sonoma."

John McCaull, land acquisition director for the Sonoma Land Trust, the local nonprofit, said it is

difficult to judge the final environmental report without knowing how the county will ultimately move forward with a developer and final plan.

“Although there are some improvements and positive revisions to the SDC Specific Plan, the fundamental problem is that we can only speculate whether the scale and footprint of the preferred alternative (1000+ homes and 900+ on-site jobs) is consistent with the actual proposals that the California Department of General Services is considering for purchase of the core campus,” McCaull wrote in an email.

Alternative proposals are still circulating, including [the Glen Ellen Historical Society's plan](#), which calls for a reduced scale of housing and commercial development. The county report, however, states the historical preservation alternative “has a very large financial feasibility gap” — about \$140 million — “that renders its viability questionable.”

Supervisor Susan Gorin, who represents the area, noted that the county's proposed specific plan seeks to support more than 900 jobs, hailing the redevelopment opportunity as a “once-in-a-lifetime process.”

Housing affordability, climate adaptation and workforce diversification, she noted, are major challenges in Sonoma Valley, a region heavily

dependent on the wine and hospitality industries.

"I have been working on the concept for a climate center for over five years with a small group of people involving education, climate scientists, economists and biologists," Gorin said in an email. In September, the Coastal Conservancy Center approved a \$250,000 grant to explore the creation of a climate center on the SDC campus.

The county's evolving plan has previously come under fire from Glen Ellen residents and conservationists, many of whom voiced concerns about the scale and density of the proposed new development.

It is unclear if changes outlined by the final environmental impact report will sufficiently resolve those conflicts and avert potential lawsuits.

Gorin described herself as "optimistic" that the next round of public input would result in a "plan that fits the needs of the Sonoma Valley while responding to the major challenges facing our county."

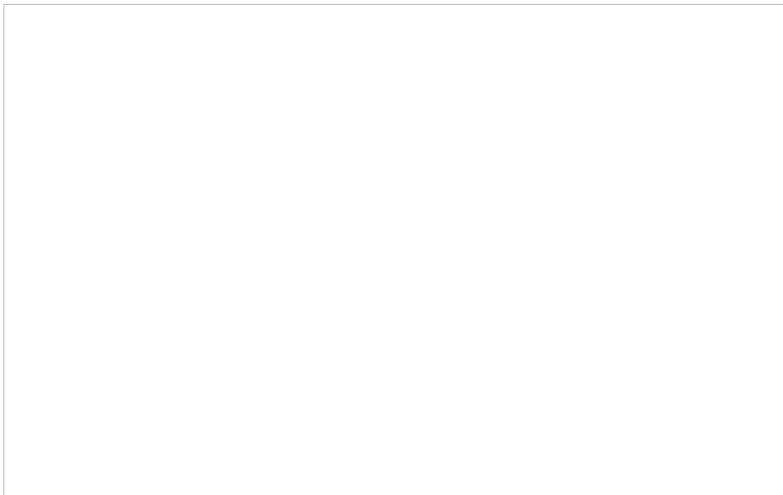
A spokesperson for the Sonoma Valley Collaborative, the coalition of business, nonprofit, health and education interests that has been heavily involved in the property's

future, said the group was not prepared to comment on the report Wednesday.

The environmental report and site specific plan next go to the Valley's Citizen Advisory Commission, then the county Planning Commission before reaching the Board of Supervisors by the end of the year.

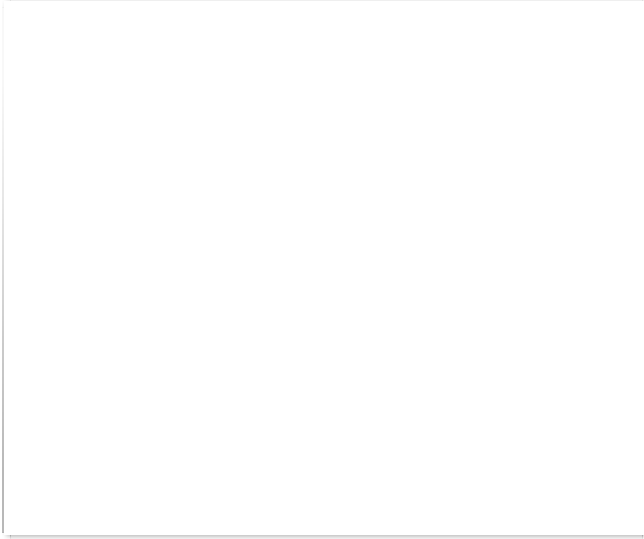
Bradley Dunn, policy manager with Permit Sonoma, the county's planning department, said revisions in the final environmental report sought to address public questions on the impact of new development.

The property encompasses one of the largest pieces of unprotected public open space in the Valley, including the wildlife corridor linking the Mayacamas Mountains and Sonoma Mountain. Trails traverse the oak and evergreen woodlands and meadows on the property, affording panoramic views of the upper Valley of the Moon.



Scientists and conservationists have identified an important wildlife corridor running through Sonoma Valley and the Sonoma Developmental Center between the Mayacamas Mountains and Sonoma Mountain. (Dennis Bolt, For The Press Democrat)

Under
the
latest



revisions, construction at the edge of the campus will be more tightly regulated to restrict lighting, with additional safeguards governing demolition of buildings near wildlife habitat.

“Public comments led to us strengthening policies on affordable housing and comments from groups like the Sonoma Ecology Center and the Center for Biological Diversity were incorporated into new policies to further protect wildlife,” Dunn said, referring to two groups who have advocated for greater habitat safeguards.

The county Board of Supervisors has the final say on the site plan and revised environmental report.

Supervisors are expected to discuss and possibly vote on the plan Dec. 16, two weeks before the state's Dec. 31 deadline for the project.

Contact Chase Hunter at chase.hunter@sonomanews.com and follow [@Chase_HunterB](https://twitter.com/Chase_HunterB) on Twitter.

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