



COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS REPORT #1

September 2020
with Addendum, October 2020

Sonoma Developmental Center Community Conversations Report #1

September 2020

Prepared for

The County of Sonoma

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With assistance from

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1 Introduction

This summary is a report of community input from demographic groups that were found to be underrepresented in previous community engagement work focused on the future of the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC). During March - July of 2020, community engagement efforts focused on engaging youth, the Latinx community, and the disability community in Sonoma Valley on what is important to them for the future of the SDC site. Engagement of very near neighbors to the SDC site was also conducted.

Additional outreach to focused groups, underrepresented segments, and the community-at-large will continue to occur through the planning process; this report is the first in others that will follow.

1.1 Project Background

The Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) is a nationally recognized institution in the heart of Sonoma Valley. At 945 acres, the property includes a large historic campus, agricultural lands to the east, and vast ecological and open space resources. The SDC provided services to persons with developmental disabilities for over 120 years; it has a deep history in the valley and came to be recognized as a place of healing and community. The SDC was the Sonoma Valley's largest employer in its heyday. In 2018 the State of California officially closed the facility and relocated clients to smaller, community-based care settings. The State of California owns the site and has forged a unique partnership with Sonoma County that allows the County, together with the community, to chart the future role of the SDC. Sonoma County is now undertaking a Specific Plan to set a vision for SDC which will consider land uses, transportation, economic viability, historic preservation, and conservation of the site's important natural resources.

The Specific Plan planning process began in early 2020 and is anticipated to be completed late 2021, along with an Environmental Impact Report. To learn more about the SDC Specific Plan, visit the project website at: <https://www.sdcspecificplan.com/>.

1.2 Previous Community Engagement & Input

Community members have been engaged since 2015 on their vision for the SDC land, with numerous community members providing input over a span of years prior to this Specific Plan process.

In 2013, a diverse partnership comprised of the County of Sonoma, the Parent Hospital Association, the Sonoma Land Trust, the Sonoma Ecology Center and other local groups came together to create a comprehensive and inclusive 18-month planning process to explore options for the future of the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) that preserve the unique human health, community and natural resources provided by SDC. In May 2015, more than 200 people participated in the first community workshop to kick-off the grassroots Transform SDC planning process.¹ The theme of the workshop focused on empowering the community to begin to establish a vision to “Dream, Create, Transform” the site. The community’s input defined initial elements of a community vision for the future of SDC, explored possible re-use options, and identified areas for further inquiry and investigation.²

In April 2018, the Glen Ellen Forum (GEF), Glen Ellen Historical Society, Sonoma Land Trust (SLT), and Sonoma Ecology Center (SEC) partnered to update the community on SDC closure, present draft goals and guiding principles for site redevelopment, and gather public feedback on future planning for the site. More than 250 people attended the workshop and participated in breakout sessions after several presentations. The workshop summary is a synthesis of participant input prepared by the SDC/Eldridge Committee of GEF and is available for review at: https://glenellen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/FINAL-SUMMARY_SDC-4-16-18-Workshop_Community-Input.pdf

Following the efforts associated with the April 2018 workshop, a committee made up of representatives from the GEF, SEC, and SLT prepared a draft vision statement

1. [Transform SDC Community Workshop #1 Synthesis Report](#) (2015)

2. [Transform SDC Community Workshop #1 Re-use Ideas](#) (2015)



and guiding principles. These principles were reviewed and supported by participants in a June 2019 workshop led by the SDC Coalition. About 170 members of the public attended the event and provided written and oral input. The vision and principles represent a distillation of community visioning that took place from 2015-2019. Notably, the principles include broad support for a community led Specific Plan where community input helps to shape the plan. Other principles are available for review in the Eldridge Vision Workshop Summary Report (2019): https://transformsdc.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/eldridge-workshop-summary_12-13-19_final.pdf

Despite inclusive outreach efforts by the organizers and community members, it was noted several demographic groups—including the Latinx community, Native Americans, the disability community, and young people—were significantly under-represented among workshop participants.

1.3 Focused Outreach Efforts

The effort to engage the underrepresented populations noted above coincided with the outbreak of COVID-19 and shelter in place orders put in place by the Governor, making outreach challenging. However, community leaders were instrumental in facilitating connections with youth leaders, who in turn were able to interview other community members. Near-neighbors and those in the disability community were also engaged through community connections with moderate success. Despite conversations and coordination with several community leaders in the Latinx community, efforts to engage virtually have so far not been very successful, although some Latinx community members were engaged through youth leaders. See Appendix A for a list of community leaders and organizations contacted during this phase of outreach.

Public Dialogue Consortium (PDC), working as a sub-consultant to prime consultant Dyett & Bhatia, conducted a total seven focus group interviews during June and July of 2020, five virtually via Zoom and two in person groups (outdoors and socially distanced):

- Three focus groups with youth leaders between the ages of 14-18
- Three focus groups with disability community affiliates
- One focus group with near neighbors

Youth leaders from Boys and Girls Club and EnviroLeaders from the Sonoma Ecology Center program participated in focus group interviews, and in turn interviewed approximately a dozen other community members.

- **Youth:** Approximately 30 community members under the age of 18 were engaged through youth leadership programs. Some youth leaders conducted interviews and collected input from peers and other community members.
- **Latinx Community:** Despite considerable outreach efforts with various community leaders and organizations, there was little progress in engaging this demographic virtually. Approximately a dozen Latinx community members were engaged through youth leaders conducting in person interviews.
- **Disability Community:** Approximately 20 community members affiliated with the disability community (family, staff and the North Bay Regional Center Client Advisory Committee) were engaged and input collected.
- **Near-Neighbors:** Approximately a dozen near neighbors were engaged in virtual focus groups.

2 Community Conversation Input

Community Conversations are small group conversations, focus groups or interviews that engage community members around **preferences, values** and **priorities**. Several virtual community conversations took place in June and July, each including a brief presentation on the background of the SDC and themes heard from previous engagement. Dozens of community members participated in virtual conversations and others were interviewed in socially distant, face-to face settings. The conversations were organized around the following questions:

1. What is most important to you for the future of the SDC site?
2. Why are these things important to you?
3. What suggestions and/or questions do you have?

2.1 Themes from Community Conversations

The following themes emerged from input heard from community members during virtual and face to face interviews:

1. Appreciation for/desire to protect the natural environment and resources
2. Develop SDC to be inclusive, accessible, inviting and safe
3. Keep the historical Main Building, add updated buildings
4. Create a center for the community to thrive together
5. Include community health and education services
6. Include opportunities for small businesses
7. Include activities for youth and families
8. Include affordable, accessible, diverse housing

While each of the themes above were mentioned by members of each of the targeted demographic groups, some priorities emerged for each group as follows:

- **Youth** were more likely to mention the desire for more activities, transportation options, entry-level jobs, and affordable housing. They voiced a strong preference to protect open space, wildlife, and the natural resources of the site.

- **Members of the Disability Community** were more likely to express a desire for mixed housing options that serve a mix of abilities, and desires for assisted and independent living, as well as for small specialty businesses that serve the disability community. There was also a strong preference to preserve the tranquility and natural landscape of the site, especially for community members that require quiet settings, and to increase accessibility for wheelchair users and others with limited mobility.
- **Near neighbors** were most focused on maintaining public access to the property, preservation of open space, transportation options to control traffic, and affordable housing to keep young families in the community.

All demographic groups strongly expressed the desire for protection of open space, wildlife and sacred indigenous sites. It was a high priority for all demographic groups that the SDC site be developed in a way that is inclusive, accessible, and inviting to the community, and provides space for the community to thrive together. While there is appreciation for the history of the site and many mentioned that they would like the historical Main Building preserved, many also mentioned they would like to see more modern, sustainable buildings rather than preserving the old campus.

Additional details for each theme emerged from the community conversations as follows:

1. Appreciation for and desire to protect the natural environment and resources

- Protect the creeks and lakes
- Protect the wildlife, wildlife corridor and biodiversity
- Keep and add to the open spaces and natural beauty
- Keep it clean, uncontaminated and pollution free
- Preserve the sacred indigenous cultural sites and the cemetery

2. Develop SDC to be inclusive, accessible, inviting and safe for the entire community

- Preserve public access

- Include bike paths, hiking trails, paths and gardens, that are accessible to all ages and abilities
- Include outdoor recreation opportunities for all ages and abilities
- Keep the site peaceful and tranquil as a place to relax and destress
- Provide better transportation, more buses, parking, and bike lanes
 - Concern for increased traffic, especially on Arnold Drive
 - Look at plans to reroute traffic away from Arnold Drive

3. Keep the historical Main Building, add updated buildings

- Design new buildings to be consistent with the historic architecture
- Build with sustainability in mind, including solar power and climate-control
- Rebuild the rest of the campus as the buildings are too old, unsafe and undesirable
- Preserve part of a residential building as a way to document the history and stories of those who worked and lived there
- House community services in the historic Main Building

4. Create a center for the community to thrive together

- Ideas include: community center, library, arts & culture center, recreation center, small concert venue, teen center, Sonoma history museum, school or community college campus
- Host workshops and educational opportunities, examples include film, recording studios
- Hold annual events and celebrations - Halloween haunted house, carnival festival
- Include art installations and murals from community members
- Include opportunities for volunteering and internships
- Include opportunities for neuro-typical and non-neurotypical to learn and work together

5. Include community health and education services

- Mental health services for all ages and abilities
- Youth services
- Education services and resources
- Medical, dental and specialized services for those with disabilities and seniors
 - Medical and clinical staff that used to work at SDC have a lot of institutional knowledge of how to serve people with developmental disabilities. There is an opportunity to train new medical professionals in this specialty.

6. Include opportunities for small businesses

- Create jobs for all ages and abilities, including teens and people with disabilities
 - Internships, jobs for youth
 - Jobs for people with developmental disabilities
- Small businesses that offer activities for the community
- Small, outdoor mall with small businesses
- Cafes, food carts and outdoor seating
- Sustainable market, small grocery store, farmers market
- Sustainable organic garden associated with stores, cafes and food carts
- Specialty businesses offering products and services to the disability community such as a shoe cobbler and specialized wheelchairs

7. Include activities for youth and families

- Parks and picnic areas
- Sporting fields - ball parks and soccer fields
- Activities, things to do and places to go for youth and teens

- Ideas include: drive in movie theater, bowling alley, laser tag, archery, indoor soccer, rec center, ice skating, roller skating rink, rock climbing, sporting fields, arcade, paint ball, escape room, equestrian area

8. Include affordable, accessible, diverse housing

- Some reported multiple families living in apartments together due to lack of affordable housing. Many youth do not see themselves being able to afford staying in Sonoma Valley.
- Encourage young families to move in
- Offer separate and integrated housing opportunities for those with developmental disabilities
- Senior care facilities, smaller, shared group housing, independent and assisted living facilities
- People do not want to see mansions for the rich
- Provide housing for agricultural workers and those most vulnerable
- Consider a homeless shelter

3 Next Steps

A community workshop is planned for early fall 2020, where additional input will be collected on the goals and guiding principles for the SDC site. Input will inform how the planning alternatives are developed, and the community will be able to participate in another workshop once alternatives are defined with more concrete planning options.

Community members will be informed of planning process to define the parameters of the Specific Plan, such as setting aside of open space and the mandate to include affordable housing. This will help focus input and feedback on areas of planning that are still open and can be shaped by community input.

Ongoing outreach will continue to be a priority throughout the planning process. Please visit the project website to view the outreach schedule and to find more information about upcoming and past public engagement opportunities: <https://www.sdcspecificplan.com/project-schedule>.

4 Appendix: List of Community Leaders and Organizations Contacted

4.1 Youth and Latinx Outreach and Engagement Work

Phone calls and email exchanges with the following:

- Daniel Weinzveg, Los Cien, Organization Development, Sonoma County
- Richard DeLeon, Hanna Institute
- Juan Hernandez, La Luz Center
- Tony Passantino, Program Manager, Sonoma Ecology Center
- Julia Megna and Jonny Elhers, EnviroLeaders Program, Sonoma Ecology Center
- Ivana Nedelchev and Alma Shaw, Sonoma Ecology Center
- Eric Gonzalez, Teen Program Director, Sonoma Boys & Girls Club
- Veronica Napoles, Executive Director, Springs Community Alliance
- AnnMarie Miller, Executive Committee, Springs Community Alliance
- Denia Candela, Neighbor, Community Organizer
- Britta Johnson, Trustee, Sonoma Valley High School
- Luis Eteva, Student Representative to School District Board, Sonoma Valley High School
- Reese Dobson, Student Leader, Sonoma Valley High School
- Caroline Bañuelos, Community Partnerships Coordinator, Center for Community Engagement, Sonoma State University
- Handshake Job Board + Virtual Job Fair, Sonoma State University

Activities Scheduled:

- June 17th virtual community conversation with youth leaders at the Sonoma Boys & Girls Club organized with Eric Gonzalez, Teen Program Director
- June 25th and 26th community conversations with Youth EnviroLeaders at Sonoma Mountain Park organized with Tony Passatino, Program Manager, Julia Megna, Education Manager and Jonny Ehlers
- Youth Leader interviews of friends and family from June 26th - July 16th
- Circulation of invitation to participate to community members via email lists and social media by some of the organizations listed above

4.2 Disability Community Outreach and Engagement Work

Phone calls and email exchanges with the following:

- Molly MacLean, PAT
- Kathleen Miller, Family Advocates United
- Gabriel Rogin, Executive Director, North Bay Regional Center (NBRC)
- Holly Pagel, Vendor Advisory Committee Chair

Activities Scheduled:

- Presentation and solicitation of input on SDC Planning project at NBRC Client Advisory Committee meeting on July 2nd
- Virtual focus group interview with leaders, family and advocates of disability community members on July 8th
- Presentation and solicitation of input on SDC Planning project at Vendor Advisory Committee meeting on July 14th

4.3 Nearby Neighbors Outreach and Engagement Work

Phone calls and email exchanges with the following:

- Kate Eagles, community member recommended by Vicki Hill, PAT



- Meg Sokoloski, community member

Activities Scheduled:

- Virtual focus group interview with near neighbors on June 30th

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Addendum

October 2020

I Additional Outreach

1.1 Youth and Latinx Community Members

Additional effort was made to reach youth and Latinx community members during September 2020 as few Latinx community members were engaged in previous outreach efforts. This was not for lack of effort (see Community Conversations Report #1 Appendix of Latinx community leaders and organizations contacted), but thought to be disproportionate effects of the pandemic on this community, and the necessary move of engagement activities into virtual formats.

During engagement efforts in the summer, two youth leaders were identified and offered internships to assist with outreach. They had great success by going to local businesses to interview employees and by presenting to classes and requesting students fill out a survey mirroring Community Conversation questions. A Spanish language focus group was also organized with support from Sonoma County. Forty-six (46) additional responses were collected, 61% younger than 20 and 75% identifying as Hispanic/Latinx.

The responses elicited aligned well with previous priorities that were expressed. Community members emphasized:

- the importance of preserving the natural beauty, serenity, open space and biodiversity of the SDC site
- the desire to maintain public access to the site, creating a safe and welcoming place for future generations that offers community benefits, services and activities
- the desire for affordable housing and rental units
- the desire for job and income opportunities
- concern for traffic and traffic safety problems if development occurs

Community members also offered several suggestions for programs, facilities and activities for the SDC site:

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- **Programs & Facilities:** museum, education and after school programs, mental health services, community gardens, multi-use rec facility, community college or Sonoma State annex, art installations, teen center
- **Activities:** pump track, skate park, arcade, bowling alley, paintball, and outlets for shopping that would keep financial resources in Sonoma Valley