



KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS REPORT

April 2021

Sonoma Developmental Center Key Informant Interviews Report

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Prepared for

The County of Sonoma

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1 Project Background and Interview Objectives

This report summarizes findings from interviews with key informants on topics related to the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) Specific Plan. Interviews were conducted with state, regional, and local experts in a variety of topics relevant to the specific planning process, including land use, mobility, housing, conservation and open space, community facilities, and safety. They were intended to generate ideas on specific topics to complement the broad general outreach being conducted. The project team conducted seven interviews between June and December 2020. The summary in the next chapter describes key themes emerging from each of the topic areas. Themes presented in this report are summaries of opinions expressed by key informants, many of whom do not represent any governmental agency. While key informants are knowledgeable in their fields, their opinions (e.g. relating to market or environmental conditions) should not be taken as facts or endorsements by the SDC Specific Plan planning team.

Project Background

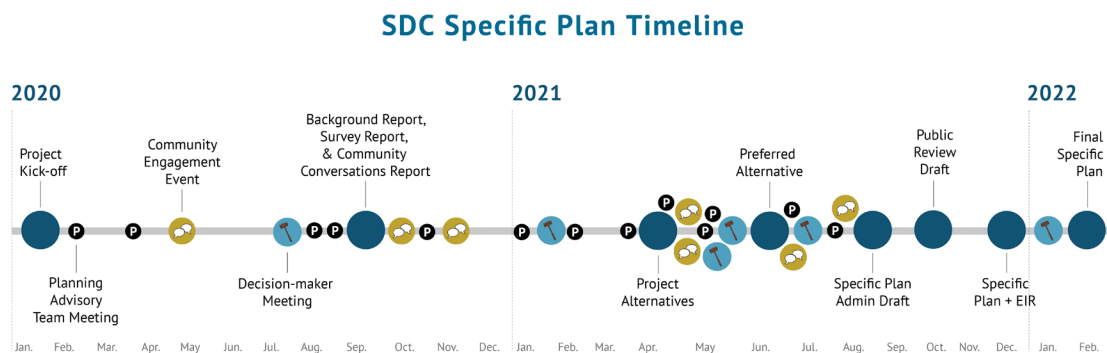
Established in 1891 in the heart of the Sonoma Valley, the former Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) encompasses a total area of 945 acres, with an approximately 180-acre historical developed campus at the core. The rest of the site is open space, including a large agricultural area to the east of Arnold Drive. The site is about six miles north of the City of Sonoma and about 15 miles south of Santa Rosa, between the unincorporated communities of Glen Ellen and Eldridge. SDC is adjacent to the Sonoma Valley Regional Park and the Jack London State Historic Park.

The SDC is the oldest facility in California created specifically to serve the needs of individuals with disabilities. In 2018, the State of California, which owns the entire property, closed the facility and relocated clients to smaller, community-based care facilities.

Through an agreement signed in 2019, the State and Sonoma County have forged a unique partnership that allows the County, together with the community, to chart the future of the State-owned property through preparation of a County-managed Specific Plan, focused on transition and overall vision and related environmental review.

The goals and objectives of the SDC Specific Plan are outlined in the State of California’s Government Code [Section 14670.10.5](#), and include provisions to prioritize housing, especially affordable housing and housing for individuals with developmental disabilities, and to preserve lands outside the approximately 180-acre core developed campus and its related infrastructure as public parkland and open space. The Specific Plan will 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 early 2022, along with an Environmental Impact Report. To learn more about the SDC Specific Plan, visit the project website at: <https://www.sdcspecificplan.com>.



A community kickoff event in April 2020 included a virtual walkthrough, four forums, each attended by an average of 90 community members, and an online survey, to which more than 500 community members responded. A virtual community workshop in November attracted participation by over 250 community members. Other community engagement has included targeted

community conversations with under-represented groups. Reports from this outreach can be found at the project website at sdcspecificplan.com.

Interview Format and Objectives

Each key informant interview included 2-4 subject experts identified by the County, and 3-5 project team members. Meetings took place over Zoom and each interview lasted about an hour.

The objective of these meetings was to gain insight from local experts in topics that would inform the development of alternatives and ultimately the SDC Specific Plan. In each interview, project team members began by asking questions relevant to the topic at hand, and then opened the floor up for experts to provide further insight. All meeting participants were offered opportunities to continue involvement in the project in the future.

2 Key Themes

State of California, Department of General Services

The conversation with staff from the State of California Department of General Services (DGS) focused on the State's expectations for disposition of the SDC property, including economic feasibility, future land uses, water use, and open space conservation.

Economic Feasibility

One of the major barriers to development at the SDC site is ensuring the economic feasibility of the project. According to DGS, the SDC site currently requires an investment of approximately \$100 million for deferred site maintenance, and significant annual operating expenses, even though the facility is closed.

Open Space Conservation

The DGS team presented some considerations that must be addressed in order to transfer the open space at the SDC site to another entity. First, while conservation easements are a common way to preserve land as open space, the SDC site does not currently have a benefactor (such as entity to which the core campus will be transferred) that can provide conservation easements. Second, the open space cannot be separated from the core campus until issues relating to water supply and associated infrastructure that are an integral part of the open space are addressed.

The reservoirs on the site currently are currently fed through diversions from creeks and are permitted for domestic and irrigation use. Allowing swimming at the lakes would require a petition to the Water Board and would increase the cost of treating the water for consumption. DGS suggested a pay-to-park

system similar to the Spring Lake system in Santa Rosa as a possibility for funding the management of the lakes going forward.

Emergency Services

Currently, the State bears responsibility for fire service at SDC. Someone in the future will have to be responsible for fire and police service costs. The Specific Plan will need to address this responsibility.

Site Development

The project team met with affordable housing developers, real estate professionals, and market rate developers based in the Sonoma area. These conversations focused on the practical aspects of site redevelopment, including financial feasibility, land use, phasing, and adaptive reuse, as well as existing demand for housing in the Sonoma Valley area, and how development can be streamlined and incentivized on the SDC site.

Economic Feasibility

Aging infrastructure came up in all conversations as the largest roadblock to financial feasibility at the SDC site. At the same time, ensuring that the project would be self-sustaining was emphasized as vital to attracting developers to the site in the future. Panelists recommended that the project team look into other sources of revenue that could support the site financially, suggesting use of the water rights, recreational facilities, agricultural uses, and equestrian use areas as possibilities on the site.

Developers also suggested that the project could be phased, presenting residential development on the east side of the site that does not have historic resources as a good place to start.

Market Demand

There is currently a huge need and demand for all types of housing in the Sonoma area. There is a severe shortage of affordable housing in the area, but also an unmet demand for market rate homes, especially single family.

According to one of the participants, the highest demand in the area is for single family homes, followed by townhome style attached housing. Housing with access to private outdoor space is especially sought-after during the pandemic. The interviewees emphasized that the SDC site presents a valuable piece of land for addressing the housing crisis, but that traffic implications must be addressed as a part of the development.

There was consensus among those in the real estate conversation that a hotel would likely do well on the SDC site. A Village Inn or rural eco-tourism hotel were presented as options that might be both financially feasible and in line with the community's vision for the site.

Land Uses

The conversation around land uses with the developers focused on housing types and densities, and the feasibility of a hotel and other uses at the SDC site. Housing developers suggested that a mix of housing types would serve the community well. Some on the panel suggested 20 dwelling units per acre as an appropriate density on the site, matching the nearby community of El-dridge while others suggested a density of 30-40 du/acre would be appropriate on the site and would provide much-needed housing to the Sonoma Valley area.

The importance of providing parking on the site came up, as most residents in this area will be driving to their destinations. Developers recommended flexible parking codes and perhaps a centralized garage surrounded by retail to serve the site.

Incentivizing Development

One of the biggest hurdles identified by both affordable housing and market rate developers in the area was the permitting process. Streamlining the environmental review process and making it easy for developers to acquire entitlements were presented as ways to incentivize development on the site – especially of affordable housing.

Development Entity

Interviewees suggested that a master developer would be a good choice for the site to manage the complicated infrastructure systems on the site. Larger developers will have a greater capacity to take on the complex financials of rehabilitating and redeveloping the site.

Historic Preservation

While historic preservation is an important aspect of preserving the unique history of the SDC site, adaptive reuse of existing buildings is not always financially advantageous. Updating and reconfiguring historic buildings can be more expensive than building new and can lead to ongoing maintenance costs as building infrastructure ages.

Comparable Projects

The Presidio has come up in some discussions as a comparable project for the SDC team to reference in the redevelopment process. The developers interviewed, however, pointed out that the Presidio required 10 to 15 years of government subsidies before it became self-sustaining, and is located in San Francisco, generating greater developer attraction. The Alameda Point redevelopment project was presented as an alternative precedent project that also faced large infrastructure rehabilitation costs. Three developer entities partnered to build out the project, and the land was provided at no cost if the developers paid for all of the infrastructure upgrades, totaling about \$100 million. At Alameda Point, the development of affordable housing was completed by a non-profit and was separate from the rest of the site development.

Mobility

Mobility within the site and access to the site are important to the success of future development, and to the site's integration into the surrounding communities of Eldridge and Glen Ellen.

Traffic

The largest concern from both the community and local transportation key informants is the possible increase in traffic following development of the SDC site. Currently, the main access routes to the SDC site along Arnold Drive pass through Glen Ellen and Eldridge. A more direct connection between the SDC site and Route 12 could provide an outlet for regional access to the site, help in case of a wildfire emergency, and prevent an increase in traffic along Arnold Drive.

Bicycle and Pedestrian Connectivity

Bicycle and pedestrian connectivity, while robust within the site, is lacking between the site and the surrounding parks and communities. There is limited north-south access and many of the surrounding roads have no shoulder. Arnold Drive, one of the main connecting roads, has heavy truck traffic and no safe area for bikes. Bicycle connections and multi-use trails have been proposed in previous planning efforts along both Arnold Drive and Route 12. Developing both a Class I and a Class II route along Arnold Drive or parallel to it in close proximity through open space would provide access for both pedestrians and inexperienced cyclists, and experienced cyclists.

Transit Connectivity

The only transit access to the SDC site right now is the Route 30 bus. There are 2 northbound and 2 southbound bus stops on the site. The Route 30 service will be maintained through site development. Currently, typical wait times between buses are around 90 minutes, although service could be increased if demand was increased after site development. One of the northbound stops needs to be replaced.

Open Space and Conservation

The expansive open space and wildlife habitat at the SDC site is one of its greatest assets for both recreation and conservation. Conversations with key

conservation groups and wildlife experts provided insight into best practices in recreation and conservation, and key natural resources on the site.

Land Conservation and Wildlife Habitat

The natural areas on the SDC campus are valuable resources in the preservation of local wildlife habitat and open space. Concentrating development on the site in the core campus and avoiding wildlife corridor such as the northern edge of the property will help to maximize the open space available for conservation and preserve key wildlife habitat. Design guidelines should be developed for the site that ensure that important habitat is protected and that the site remains permeable to wildlife and remains a robust local ecosystem.

Open Space for Recreation

In addition to providing valuable wildlife habitat, the open space at the SDC site has provided recreational opportunities for the local and regional community. As with development, opportunities for active recreation at the site should be concentrated in the developed core campus, leaving the rest of the site available for passive recreation and trail systems.

The site currently has many unofficial trails, making travel on the site confusing and occasionally dangerous when hikers get lost. A new trail network should be implemented along with site redevelopment to consolidate and clarify the network that already exists. This trail system should be supported by clear wayfinding and mapping, and should include trails, staging areas, and access roads, as well as emergency vehicle access and fire routes. The area could be well served by a central visitor's center, similar to the Point Reyes visitor's center.

The lakes, while originally man-made, also provide opportunities for both wildlife habitat and recreation on the SDC site. Lake Sutton has been used unofficially by generations of SDC residents as a recreational area for swimming, fishing and boating. Preserving this lake as a recreational asset while still allowing for wildlife access and habitat preservation would greatly benefit

residents and visitors. The lower lake has been less accessible to the public, and should remain primarily a resource for the local flora and fauna.

Water Management

Water is one of the SDC site's greatest available resources. The two reservoirs as well as multiple natural springs and creeks on the site can provide water for consumption, recreation, and as a natural resource. Conversations around water focused on both water for domestic use at the site, and water as a natural resource.

Water Rights

The water rights at the SDC site are tied the land ownership, and currently held by the State of California. The water rights will be transferred with ownership of the land.

Water Supply

The reservoirs and natural creeks on the SDC site have the potential to provide for all of the water needs on the site. Although there is a water treatment plant on the site, it will need significant repairs or replaced. Rehabilitation of the water treatment plant will both avoid the need to pump water off-site for treatment and provide a valuable emergency water source for the site, the City of Sonoma, and surrounding areas in the event of a pump system failure or damage to the aqueduct in case of an earthquake, or wildfires.

Once developed, the site will be supplied by Valley of the Moon Water District (VOMWD), the local water retailer. VOMWD currently draws water from the Russian River system and groundwater aquifers in the area. Before the completion of a water treatment plant if there is local water need, the SDC site can be served by VOMWD.

Wastewater

The existing regional wastewater treatment plant that served the site when it was occupied likely still has capacity to serve a developed SDC site. While the

main lines are in good condition, the lines and systems that connect to the SDC site will need to be rehabbed and modernized.

Watershed Management

The water resources contained on the SDC site present an opportunity to improve the health and sustainability of the regional watershed. Design and planning of the site should emphasize restoration of the watershed health on the site. Restoration of Sonoma Creek should be a focal point and would be well supported through the development of a creek restoration plan.

The area's groundwater basins are also low and being quickly depleted in some parts of the system. Site redevelopment should explore the potential of leveraging the water resources at SDC for groundwater replenishment. This could be done with the creation of percolation ponds on the site itself, or through pumping water offsite to be injected into groundwater basins.

3 Interviewees

Following is the list of key informants who participated in small group meetings with the planning team conducted late summer and fall 2020:

- Bob McKinnon – DGS Real Estate
- Gerald McLaughlin – DGS Real Estate
- Jim Martone – DGS Real Estate
- Victor Gonzales – developer, PAT member
- Robert Upton - developer, PAT member
- Peter Ziblatt – real estate lawyer, PAT member
- Efrem Carrillo – Co-Director of Housing Development, Burbank Housing; formerly on Sonoma board of Supervisors
- Devika Goetschius – Board Member, Generation Housing; Executive Director, Housing Land Trust of Sonoma County
- Scott Johnson – Director of Business Development, Northern California, EAH Housing
- Kirk Lok – President and COO of Lok Group Companies – Hotels in Sebastapol and Petaluma; Longtime Sonoma City resident
- Beth Cuccia Reilly – Sonoma County Realtor
- Keith Woods – CEO, North Coast Builders Exchange, former President and CEO of Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce (1987-2000)
- Brad McCarty – Glen Ellen Resident, Sonoma Bike and Ped Advisory Committee Alternate (D1)
- Ken Tam – Sonoma City Regional Parks Department
- Steven Schmitz – Transit Specialist at Sonoma County Transit
- Steven F. Lee – Adjacent landowner, Glen Ellen resident, Glen Ellen Historical Society, Senior Scientist at Sonoma Ecology Center, focus on water

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- John McCaull – Land Acquisition Director, Sonoma Land Trust
- Misti Arias – Acquisition Manager, Sonoma County Ag and Open Space
- Matt Fullner - Interim General Manager, Valley of the Moon Water District (VOMWD)
- Jay Jasperse – Chief Engineer and Director of Groundwater Management for Sonoma Water