



... to protect the land forever

## Protecting the land and the people of the Sonoma Developmental Center



Located in the “pinchpoint” of the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor, nearly 800 of SDC’s 1,000 acres are undeveloped and wild, making it critical habitat for wider-ranging mammals, like mountain lion, deer, bobcat, bear and coyote. This is why Sonoma Land Trust is a leading partner of the effort to develop a community-centered plan for SDC. Photo by Scott Hess Photography.

Your land trust has become centrally involved in charting the future of the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) and some may wonder why. For such a complex matter, the answer is simple. SDC sits on 1,000 acres right in the middle of the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor, and approximately 800 of those acres are undeveloped — many would say wild. It is critical habitat for wider-ranging mammals, like mountain lion, deer, bobcat, bear and coyote, who require expansive open spaces to roam. SDC is also located at the “pinchpoint” of the wildlife corridor, the section that is in

grave danger of closing up and isolating animals on one side from those on the other: a genetic setback in the making.

We cannot let that happen.

So in 2012 — in the face of a diminishing commitment from the State towards operating SDC — Sonoma Land Trust helped convene a local coalition that includes Supervisor Susan Gorin and numerous community groups and county agencies to *Transform SDC*. This project, unlike any other with which we’ve been involved, seeks to engage

the local community to create a “redevelopment” plan that we anticipate will guide the future use of SDC’s land, health care services and infrastructure.

“While this endeavor is complicated by the fact that both the facility and the land are owned by the State of California, we have strong reason to believe that Governor Brown would not disregard a comprehensive community planning effort,” says John McCaull, an attorney and former environmental lobbyist hired by Sonoma Land Trust last year to serve as land acquisition project manager on Sonoma Valley initiatives. “We need to

---

By 2016, the goal of *Transform SDC* is to develop financially sustainable options for providing crucial health care services for those with developmental and intellectual disabilities, along with provisions for preserving the land for wildlife and recreational use.

---

show the Governor that we can develop a locally supported vision for SDC that will significantly reduce the State's financial pressures for operating the facility and forever protect the valuable open space lands on the property."

To fund the 18-month-long community planning process that will kick off in 2015, Sonoma Land Trust has raised \$400,000 from the State Coastal Conservancy, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, the Resources Legacy Fund, Impact100 Sonoma, the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, and our members. By 2016, the goal of *Transform SDC* is to develop financially sustainable options for providing crucial health care services for those with developmental and intellectual disabilities, along with provisions for preserving the land for wildlife and recreational use.

"We hope to engage a wide diversity

of interests in the community, including people who don't even yet know that they should care," says John. "The natural resource values at SDC are so significant that we risk losing something critical to our mission if we don't act now."

What the plan will ultimately look like is unknown; the coalition is open to any and all ideas. Interested parties are welcome to contact John McCaull at [johnm@sonomalandtrust.org](mailto:johnm@sonomalandtrust.org).



*Preserving the land for wildlife and recreational use is a key goal of the Transform SDC planning process. Photo by Scott Hess Photography.*



*Kathleen Miller and her son, Dan. Photo courtesy of Press Democrat/Kent Porter.*

## Family and community ties

Since 1891, the Sonoma Developmental Center has served as a residential facility for individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, including Dan.

Now 46 years old, Dan has lived at SDC for 13 years and was in a similar facility in Southern California before it was closed. His mother, Kathleen Miller, knows what it's like to lose your safety net and has become a fierce advocate for the residents and employees of SDC. She also serves as the president of the Parent Hospital Association, a leading member of the *Transform SDC* coalition.

While the State's newer care model of integrating those with developmental challenges into smaller community homes should work for some of SDC's remaining clients, Kathleen doesn't believe it will work for those with severe behavioral challenges and those who are

medically fragile. "My son would be difficult to place in a group home because of his multiple diagnoses," she says. "He and others could end up in jail or be subject to multiple acute psych hospitalizations. We need to come up with a solution that works for all residents."

The Center also employs more than 1,000 people, making it the largest employer in the Sonoma Valley by far. Closing it without replacing those jobs would be devastating. "Clearly, protecting the land cannot happen without marrying conservation interests to economic and social concerns," concludes John McCaull.