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COMMENTS BY SONOMA LAND TRUST
DEPARTMENT OF DEVELOPMENTAL SERVICES PUBLIC HEARING ON THE
TRANSFORMATION OF SONOMA DEVELOPMENTAL CENTER
JULY 18, 2015
SONOMA VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL, SONOMA, CA

My name is John McCaull, and I am a Land Acquisition Program Manager for the Sonoma Land Trust. I currently live in Glen Ellen, and have lived and worked in Sonoma County for the past 10 years. In my role with the land trust, I primarily focus on advancing our conservation agenda in the Sonoma Valley and Sonoma Mountain region. I also serve on the steering committee for the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) Coalition chaired by Supervisor Susan Gorin.

SDC has been a defining institution of the State of California and the Sonoma Valley for over 125 years. There have been 23 Governors—if you count Jerry Brown twice—who have served since Robert Waterman became Governor in 1891. As we face a decision by Governor Brown and the California Legislature to close SDC by 2018, we need to make choices over the next few years that honor the legacy of this incredible facility, and the remarkable natural lands that surround the developed campus.

Because time is limited today, I want to focus my testimony in outlining how the Sonoma Land Trust and the SDC Coalition intend to provide input to the closure plan, and the discussion of future uses of the property. Today, we are just submitting these general comments. By the September 1st comment deadline, we

will also submit much more detailed written comments addressing many of the different aspects of closure, and potential reuse ideas for the property.

In addition to our organization's comments, we are working through the TransformSDC Project and the SDC Coalition with a team of consultants and the entire Sonoma community to produce a feasibility study for different use scenarios for SDC. This study will look at comparable models from around the country for other facilities and properties that may have faced similar choices while going through a major use transition. We will submit a draft of the feasibility study by September 1, and a final draft sometime during the month of September.

Based on the community workshop held in early May in Sonoma, we have also distilled a draft mission/vision statement for a transformed SDC:

Create a public-private partnership driven by community ideas and values that showcases the site's history, maintains critical services for the developmentally disabled and preserves the natural resources and open space of the site.

We have been calling these our pillars for a transformed SDC: a new regional hub for housing and health care services for the developmentally disabled and a protected and intact natural landscape. We believe this is also the vision that an overwhelming majority of Sonoma residents support.

Under the California Welfare and Institutions Code, whenever the Department of Developmental Services proposes to close a developmental center, they have to hold at least one public hearing prior to submitting the closure plan to the Legislature. Until this past year, the law has been unclear on the actual impact and substantive weight of public testimony. The law only states that DDS has to "summarize public comment" in the plan.

If the purpose of today's hearing is just to patiently sit through hours of testimony and then summarize and categorize comments, this will have been a waste of everyone's time. I believe that the DDS staff here today, Director Rogers and Secretary Dooley are all committed to the idea that the SDC closure planning process is different than any previous effort in California. I believe that DDS is making a conscious choice by using the "transform" language on their web site and the notice for this meeting to return to the spirit and recommendations from the January 2014 "Task Force Report on the Future of Developmental Centers in California." Transform is a very different word than close, so I hope the real purpose of today—and the work we do together over the next few months—is the beginning of a creative and collaborative discussion about what a "transformed" SDC looks like, how do we fund it, and how do we make it happen.

One of the things that is certainly different from previous closures is our local legislators and Sonoma County spent months advocating for improvements to the closure law to ensure that we have a real voice in shaping the future of SDC, and influencing the manner in which "closure" happens. There are new requirements adopted as part of the state budget that dramatically increase the specificity of what needs to be in a closure plan, and a new requirement that DDS ***"shall confer with the county in which the development center is located, and shall consider recommendations for the use of the developmental center property."***

In the months to come, we are going to spend a lot of time talking about how to realize our vision, what the various costs and practical consideration are, and how to identify other complementary uses that are consistent and compatible with the two pillars we have identified. What we ask of DDS, Secretary Dooley and Governor Brown is true collaboration and a commitment to treat Sonoma as an equal partner in determining the future of SDC. That is the only real way to honor the legacy of this amazing institution.

Thanks very much.