

An Eco-Community for Eldridge Village

A powerful, coherent vision can help elevate the goals of the project above niche interests. Funders, progressive developers, and community volunteers are often attracted to sites that have a compelling vision. This compelling vision can help bring significant resources to the project and help it avoid potentially divisive local politics.

Sites of significant acreage without a central, coherent vision are often parceled off to various, unrelated users. At best, this new development misses an opportunity to create something that is greater than the sum of its parts. At worst, a divided strategy can result in lengthy negotiations over boundaries and resources, slowing or sometimes halting a project entirely.

“SDC Transformation Study,” Potrero Group

PREFACE

In this critical time of intense global pressure from rapidly growing population, shrinking land and resources, and dramatic earth changes due to climate change, the availability of the beautiful Eldridge property can be seen as an opportunity to do something wonderful. It is a gift to the community and a fulfillment of some of our most cherished dreams. But due to its rarity and beauty, it can also become an object of personal ambition, subject to exploitation for personal and/or corporate profit. Purchased with taxpayer money in 1890 for \$53,000, the property is now worth millions, and millions more could be made from a shining resort with pool, gardens, horses and all amenities for the pleasure of the elite. But even theirs will be a vanishing pleasure as the cumulative effects of global warming build; and nothing we have done so far, in the four decades since the first warnings were brought before the public, has done much to arrest its fearsome progress.

We want our beautiful county to retain its beautiful rural character despite growing population. We have been overwhelmed with recent commercial development in the service of tourism, bringing more dollars to the already well-to-do, displacing or evicting the working classes and increasing the untended ranks of the homeless. We wish to keep the real needs of the community in the forefront, while protecting the character of the landscape.

At Eldridge, we have the opportunity to demonstrate that we are capable of living in better accord with the earth and greater harmony with one another.

Our times call for the implementation of a new paradigm for living together peaceably on this verdant planet. Here in Sonoma County we are blessed, not only with good soil and glorious scenery but with creative, artistic and intelligent people who are committed to envisioning a better world and who have investigated new

economies, local food networks, explorations in consciousness, organic diets and healthy living. We know that a “better world is possible.” The question is how to summon the political will, which can only come from the grassroots.

This proposal is an offering – an attempt to initiate a process of sincere, person-to-person discussion and sharing. What can we do with 834 acres that will unify our community and replenish our earth?

In accord with Sonoma County’s tradition of innovation in the fields of organic farming, natural healing and social development, Eldridge Village could become a model community demonstrating the feasibility of living within the tightening parameters of climate change, where housing is reasonable priced, wild lands are preserved, and the community strives for self-sufficiency in energy, resource management, income generation and regenerative farming.

A Model Eco-Community

Our objective is to create a complete community with the lowest possible footprint in the central (developed) part of the campus, embraced by preserved wildland and open space stretching all the way up Sonoma Mountain, with mixed income housing and including a sizeable number of affordable residences.

We envision Eldridge EcoVillage as a [modern intentional community](#) employing the latest renewable and sustainable technology, growing much of its own organic produce for its residents and neighbors, and living lightly on the earth. Its carbon footprint will be as low as possible. It will be people-centered rather than profit-centered, democratically and transparently organized, a place for families, where children are safe and elders are respected, where local arts and entertainment and sports take the place of celebrity-worship and where respect for the natural world is paramount. Here we will welcome all peoples who share our vision, especially members of our Latino community, so central to Valley life, and Native Americans of the region.

At the center of the community, though separate from the residential sectors, will be an **Eco Research and Information Center** where climate-resilient procedures employed on the property will be documented and assessed using measurable objectives and outcomes such as those set out by the One Planet Living Principles and which are already in application at a number of centers similar in intent to the one we are proposing. The standards may be accessed here:

<http://www.bioregional.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Goals-and-Guidance-for-Communities-Jan-2017.pdf>

With the research center will be a small conference or **retreat center** where workshops, lectures and weekend retreats will be held, a potential source of income for the community.

This complex on the property will provide validation and oversight of the systems employed on the land and will also contribute financially.

General Plan

The property, originally purchased in 1889, was re-built after the San Francisco Earthquake and opened in 1909 as the Sonoma State Home for mentally retarded children. The name was changed to the Sonoma State Hospital in 1953 and an ambitious building process began, and “the last vestiges of the 19th- century asylum mentality were cleared away to make room for modern client-centered treatment methods.” (WRT Report)

The newer section of the Hospital was built in the 1960s on the Eastern side of the roadway, Arnold Drive. This area is close to Suttonfield Lake and the area used for a farm, which at one time supplied the community with produce, dairy, and meat. The hospital was re-named the Sonoma Developmental Center in 1985.

At its peak, cottage industry in the community supplied most of the residents’ basic needs.

The two main areas of the campus, which lie on either side of Arnold Drive, seem to be suited to different uses.

We envision the older, Western area as a site for housing, shops, small local businesses, a historical museum, and perhaps a cultural center for concerts, theatrical performances and art showings. A large, older building near the museum (which is likely to be housed in the Superintendent’s House near the Southern edge) might be suitable for offices for nonprofit organizations. Along the Western border of the campus, up to the undeveloped hillside, spaces could be rented for repair shops, workshops and artist studios.

On the Eastern side, where the Little Farm existed prior to the Tubb’s Fire of 2017, there will be an organic farm. It could also serve as a Regional Food Hub, helping local farmers distribute their products, with road access from Highway 12 on the Eastern boundary. We might want to begin with a smaller model, a community co-op composed of several farms, CSA members and consumers, like [Our Table Cooperative](#) in Oregon. A small stable for boarding horses could also be maintained there.

The areas where there are already buildings and a swimming pool would be suitable for family homes, affordable workforce housing, community recreation, childcare, and a small health center.

Housing for a rehabilitation center for veterans and/or homeless persons interested in learning to farm could also be built in this area.

The local community has a strong will to protect the undeveloped area of the property as open space under the management of State and Regional Parks. It might be better to keep the whole property together, but that remains to be seen. In this proposal we are talking only about the developed campus, 134 acres with some 150 buildings in various states of disrepair.

Governance

We understand that the County Board of Supervisors, working in partnership with the State's Department of General Services will be the administrative body for this project.

A land trust could be created to administer the entire project, along the lines of the highly successful Presidio Trust.

Another option would be a **Community Land Trust (CLT)** which would allow more participation by the residents and also help to hold down land prices in the region, which are currently rising at an intolerable rate. It's possible to have a CLT within a land trust. An excellent resource for combining different types of trusts and conservation easements to protect open space is Equity Trust in Burlington, Vermont.

CLTs were created during the 1950s as a way to help black farmers obtain land ownership. Since that time, several hundred CLTs have been employed to govern land-based housing communities.

With an agricultural easement on the Little Farm, protecting it in perpetuity, and a conservation easement on the open space area, the CLT would hold title to the land, leasing it to tenants on the property, be they residents, business owners, farmers, or independent nonprofit agencies. Usually the lease is for 99 years. Tenants own the improvements on the property including buildings, fences, and other features which they can sell at lease-restricted prices when they choose to leave, and the lease transferred upon termination, but the land remains in the Trust.

A CLT is managed by a Board of Trustees, which includes equal representation of officials of the Trust, the residents, members of the surrounding community, business owners, and the staff.

The benefits of ownership by a CLT include the following:

- 1) As the land is held by the trust in perpetuity and can never be sold, the price remains stable, with land leased to residents, farmers, and businesses for 99

- years. This kind of stability is desperately needed in communities with escalating land prices like ours.
- 2) The shared administration of the Trust will emphasize participatory democracy.
 - 3) Environmental standards can be set, maintained and revised as necessary, as the property is not going to be placed on the market and tenants participate in decision-making.
 - 4) Members of the community develop strong bonds with each other and with the surrounding community.

[Champlain Land Trust](#) is a good example of a large community managed by a CLT. More information may be found at [Sustainable Law Economies Center](#) in Oakland and at the [National Community Land Trust Network](#). The Equity Trust in Burlington, Vermont, is available for consultations regarding structuring the CLT.

Village Life:

A caring, peaceful community...

We recognize a deep need for real communities where personal and direct relationships with one another prevail; where nature and care of the earth take precedence over profit; where economic models based on sharing and trust are employed; where youth are given an opportunity to play a role in creating a better future for humanity, and where people of color and immigrants will be valued participants.

***Infrastructure**

According to the assessment done by Wallace Roots and Todd, who released their report in April, much of the plumbing and electricity will have to be repaired or replaced. What a perfect opportunity to install the newest technology for management of power and water with the least waste and without reliance on fossil fuels.

***Renewable energy**

Every effort will be made to procure energy from renewable sources.

The Community would meet all or most of its energy needs from a MicroGrid similar to the system at [Stone Edge Farm](#), just west of Sonoma. The MicroGrid would consist of a system of power lines connecting a network of electrical services and integrating various forms of distributed energy generation (solar, microturbine, hydrogen fuel cells) and storage (batteries and hydrogen) with real time monitoring and control. It would be capable of operating either normally, connected to and importing electricity from the larger utility grid, or disconnected from the grid, in island mode. It would also be capable of exporting energy to the larger utility grid.

Every use will be evaluated for greenhouse gas impacts and carbon footprint. Every effort will be made to engage residents in managing the property, and to develop methods of transportation on the land, and on the roads to neighboring towns, that do not use fossil fuels.

***Transportation**

Within the property, there will be plenty of bike and walking trails that are also useable by small electric vehicles (such as scooters, jeeps etc). Ideally, no gasoline vehicles will be allowed on the property at all.

An electric streetcar would be a great service in the Valley, supplying transportation for the residents from Kenwood to Sonoma as well as members of the Eldridge community. Something has to be done to mitigate traffic throughout the region, and lower carbon emissions.

***Water system**

To provide for residents and the farm, the Village at Eldridge will utilize its own ample water and perhaps its own sewer system, generating its own energy (micro-grid), entirely from renewable sources, including solar and wind.

WRT observed that much of the plumbing is barely functional. We will need to consult a highly trained water resources engineer like [Sherwood Design Engineers](#) (a consultant on the WRT team) to re-design the water delivery system using state-of-the-art sustainable practices. The pipes will not be pvc plastic because of the risk of fire; in the October fires, plastic piping melted in the Fountaingrove area and polluted the water supply. We will employ water catchment systems, drip irrigation, protection of riparian areas, and will support diversity of plant and animal life.

***Waste**

Food waste will be composted on site. Composting toilets may also be employed if the County will permit them. The technology has advanced considerably, and Home Depot carries quite a range of products <https://www.homedepot.com/b/Bath-Toilets-Toilet-Seats-Bidets-Toilets-Composting-Toilets/N-5yc1vZcb8q>

The feasibility of using composted human waste on crops is being studied.

***Carbon Farming**

Between 1997 and 2012, the United States lost nearly 25 million acres of farmland to development. In the next two decades, as aging farmers retire, roughly two-thirds of our remaining independently owned agricultural land – more than 573 million

acres – is expected to come up for sale due to farmer retirement. But young farmers can't afford to purchase this land. We need to develop innovative ways to make land available to farmers.

Part of the Eldridge property was once used to grow food for the facility as was common in many children's hospitals. It should not be too difficult for it to be licensed as an organic farm. This area can be used in many ways to benefit farmers and to provide healthy food for the community.

Furthermore, organic, regenerative farming, in addition to being healthier for people and planet than conventional farming, enriches the soil and actually draws down carbon from the atmosphere.

Every day scientists release new reports confirming that atmospheric carbon dioxide is still rising along with warming temperatures, and everywhere we are seeing the impacts of climate change sooner than predicted, but for lack of political will little is being done to research and deliver new models for reducing our impact on the planet. Appropriate technologies exist. The [Drawdown](#) project described 100 ways to actually draw down carbon from the atmosphere. Scientists like Mark Jacobson have shown that with political will, this country could become completely converted to renewables by 2030; see [The Solutions Project](#).

The ability of the soil to draw carbon down from the atmosphere is becoming widely understood and demonstrated. According to [Regeneration International](#), a recent study in [Scientific Reports](#) reveals that:

By better managing farmland soil, the amount of carbon stored in the top 30 centimeters of the soil could increase an extra 0.9 to 1.85 gigatons each year...This is equivalent to carbon globally emitted by the transport sector (1.87 gigatons of Carbon); and equivalent to 3 – 7 billion tonnes of CO₂ which could be removed from the atmosphere. For comparison, the US emits 5 billion tonnes of CO₂ equivalent each year (Edgar database, 2015).

An article explaining the study in more detail may be found [here](#).

The work of Paul and Elizabeth Geiser on [Singing Frogs Farm](#) in Sebastopol practicing no-till farming and other techniques, demonstrates that, using the 34 methods outlined by the [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) (NRCS), a farm can produce a large quantity of food using limited irrigation, producing more income per acre than the average winery.

Our agricultural county no longer produces food for its residents. Although there has been no survey, the Ag Commissioner estimated in 2016 that about three percent of the food we consume in the county is actually grown here. Thus we remain dependent on the Safeway trucks bringing food from as far away as 1500 miles while we grow wine grapes and export our wines all around the globe. As should be obvious, this system of exports and imports sustained by fossil fuels increases our carbon footprint; further, it greatly

limits our ability to feed ourselves. Reversing this situation is going to be difficult as *young farmers cannot afford land to grow food.*

In view of all the pressures on land use in this county, with more pressures since the October fires destroyed some 5,300 homes, it is mandatory that this model community create livable spaces within the increasing restrictions and challenges posed by climate change, and that its carbon footprint be as low as possible. To do so, the community must achieve some degree of food independence, also known as food sovereignty. We should produce as much of our own food as possible. There is lots of space on the property for gardens large and small in addition to the “Little Farm” area.

***Housing and other buildings**

Affordable housing is essential and desperately needed in our county, which has one of the highest homeless rates in California.

We’d like to create housing in phases, starting with existing usable buildings on the property suitable for workers who want to become members of this community. Buildings found to be unusable will be torn down. There is probably quite a bit of lead and asbestos that will have to be appropriately removed.

Housing will be clustered so that there is no sprawl and as much open space as possible may be used for gardens, play areas, enjoyment of natural environment and so forth. Varied sizes from tiny homes to apartments and individual homes will offer a range of leasing prices. Some provision for people to build their own houses on leased land could be incorporated into the whole.

Construction on the property will emphasize variety, creativity, and natural building materials, with designs that stay cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

There will also be a large **community building** with full electric kitchen and some indoor recreation space for indoor exercise, games, a library, a theatre for movies, concerts etc.

There will also be a **meditation center** on the property for meditation, yoga and small classes.

A small independent **health clinic** would be included, and also a cooperative **childcare** center run primarily by the families using the service.

A historical society, as proposed by Glen Ellen, with a museum, would be included on the West side (as stated above).

***Multigenerational community**

We envisage a community in which elders play a role in the life of the community in whatever way they choose, just like everybody else. They may wish to garden or they might like to hang out with the babies. Maybe they’d like to tell stories of what their lives were like long ago, and how they envisage our future. Some may prefer to live in set-

aside senior housing, others to live multigenerationally, but whatever their housing choices, they will play a valued role in our village.

***Cooperative child-care center**

Childcare will be available to children of residents who work on the property. (Children of residents employed elsewhere may be included if space permits.) Enjoyment of the outdoors, learning from nature, care of the earth, practical DIY skills, sports, music and arts, which children may undertake in following their interests (basic principle of Montessori and Waldorf models).

Services and Rehabilitation for the unsheltered

We plan to create a rehabilitation program for people who have been homeless but are motivated to learn new skills and rebuild their lives. We will work with other nonprofits with experience working with homeless including the [Homeless Garden Project](#) in Santa Cruz, CA, which has been working with homeless people interested in learning to grow food. Unlike that project, the Eldridge site could provide transitional housing at the same time. This could become a complete nonprofit healing service

Work-Live Community

This will be a big project with a lot to do, and in lieu of large amounts of corporate capital, it needs people who live in the Village to share the many tasks associated with maintaining it. In return for their work, they will receive a reduction in rents.

There will be many opportunities to find jobs in the community, and qualified residents will have priority to take them: work in the farm, on the many aspects of property management, in the childcare center and clinic, in the museum, in small businesses (such as a restaurant featuring fresh, organic and “down home” meals, or a cafe) and in various nonprofits working to develop solutions to the consequences of a warming planet.

Private Enterprise

At the undeveloped Northern end of the property we envision some type of private business serving the community, such as a retreat and conference center, or perhaps a healing sanctuary with spa, therapeutic massage and other treatments, such as can be enjoyed at similar places like Ojo Caliente near Santa Fe, New Mexico, or Esalen in Big Sur, or Calistoga. These are elegant places that attract a very conscious, usually prosperous clientele. During the week, their services can be made available to locals.

FINANCING

A number of new financing instruments have become available. We believe a combination of these tools will serve the community well.

In California, redevelopment ended in 2012 and has since been replaced by a new mechanism, the Enhanced Infrastructure Financing District (EFID). The District, formed by a government agency like the Board of Supervisors, creates a plan for revitalizing the Eldridge area. Most of the infrastructure on the campus is obsolete or in need of major improvement, at an estimated cost of \$114 million, according to the report by Wallace, Root and Todd (WRT). An EFID would provide a mechanism for borrowing that money. The loan would be repaid by property Tax Increments. Property tax on rental properties and commercial enterprise are the source of those funds.

Other mechanisms worth exploring include Direct Public Offerings (DPOs) which became law in the JOBS Act signed by President Obama in 2012. DPOs allow members of the local community (and others) to buy shares in development of the property (or in specific projects) without having to be personally accredited as in IPOs. The shares can be relatively low cost. Cutting Edge Capital in Oakland is a resource for designing such an investment package perhaps including a number of different instruments.

A number of organizations now exist to support investment in local projects that support the investors' values. One such group is Slow Money, founded on the principles of Slow Food. Together these programs and individuals are known as Social Impact investing. We know there are many individuals in Sonoma County with resources to engage in this kind of investing and we believe that many of them are committed to the values we intend to embody at Eldridge EcoVillage.

A resource for identifying these investors is the book, *Born on Third Base* by Chuck Collins, co-Founder of [Wealth for the Common Good](#) and head of the [Program on Inequality and Common Good](#) at the Institute for Policy Studies.

We will consult with the CDFI Coalition ([Community Development Financial Institutions](#)) and the [Forum for Sustainable and Responsible Investments](#) as well as other organizations dedicated to providing funding for the common good. For the Farm, we believe we will find guidance and some support from [California FarmLink](#) and the [Northern California Community Loan Fund](#), both CDFIs.

Summary

We need to put food, water, energy, justice and housing at the top of our agenda for a livable society, emphasizing those basic elements of life as the foundation for a free society, while wine and tourism are enjoyed as luxuries that enhance but do not sustain life. [People before profit.]

With the help of innovative and local community stakeholders, some of whom are listed below, we believe we can co-create a more detailed proposal of what such a project might look like and how it can become economically self sufficient while demonstrating a replicable model for living more lightly on the land. Please JOIN US!

This proposal was prepared by Stephanie Hiller with additions by Jerry Bernhaut and Tom Conlon and members of the Eldridge EcoVillage Association.

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