

### SDC Acronym Salad

An NOP for the SDC EIR? We know, we know: It all gets so confusing. Journalists use acronyms to cut down on word counts, because given the finite number of inches on a page, every word counts.

But we recognize that, especially for a complicated and ongoing saga like that of the Sonoma Developmental Center, an acronym cheat sheet might be helpful. So, here's a start, in alphabetical order:

**CEQA:** California Environmental Quality Act. This act requires analysis and mitigation of environmental impacts on proposed development projects.

**D&B:** Dyett & Bhatia. These urban planning consultants have been hired by Permit Sonoma to create a specific plan and EIR for the redevelopment of the SDC.

**DGS:** California Department of General Services. DGS is the State of California's real estate arm, and is responsible for disposal of surplus property, such as the SDC.

**EIR:** Environmental Impact Report. This report details the environmental impacts and required mitigations for proposed development projects in language the public can understand. Under this heading we can include DEIR (draft EIR) and FEIR (final EIR).

**NOP:** Notice of Preparation. This is just what it sounds like — a notice that some kind of legal document is being prepared. In the case of the document released by Permit Sonoma this month, it refers to the scoping of the SDC EIR.

**SCALE:** Sonoma County Advocates for a Liveable Environment. This coalition of community organizations joined with Sonoma County Tomorrow in the successful lawsuit challenging the SDC Specific Plan EIR's compliance with CEQA.

**SDC:** Sonoma Developmental Center. First established in the late nineteenth century as the California Home for the Care and Training of Feeble-Minded Children, the SDC ended its service as an institution dedicated to the care of individuals with developmental disabilities.

# The healing power of nature

## How the outdoors supports brain health

By Raj Kalra, MD



Source: Raj Kalra, MD

Dr. Raj Kalra with his parents, Om and Darshan Kalra, enjoying the outdoors on an afternoon at a local winery.

There's something almost magical about stepping outside, feeling the sun on your face, or taking in the view of trees, hills, or even a nearby vineyard. But this isn't just a pleasant experience — it's powerful medicine for the brain. A growing body of research shows that spending time in nature can boost mood, improve sleep, sharpen thinking, and even slow cognitive decline.

For many of us, life has become increasingly indoor and screen-focused. We wake up, check our phones, spend hours inside, and go to bed under artificial light. This "indoor life" takes a toll on our mental and physical health — and for seniors,

the impact can be even greater. Time outdoors is one of the simplest, most accessible ways to restore balance and protect the brain.

Natural light plays a particularly important role. Exposure to morning sunlight helps regulate the body's circadian rhythm — the internal clock that controls sleep and wake cycles. When this rhythm is disrupted, sleep quality suffers, which can affect memory, mood, and daytime alertness. For those living with dementia, consistent light exposure can even help reduce sun-

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Evacuation – from 11

my wooden deck and siding. I'd love a personal trainer to help me build the muscle and stamina I'd need to defend my property from the flames. I'd love a great big rock outcropping I could retreat to when all else fails.

But the pocketbook's just not fat enough.

I'm not saying we shouldn't continue looking at ways to build more fire resistance into our homes, businesses, and communities, especially those in the wildland-urban interface (WUI), like the SDC. But from all I've learned in my reporting on wildfire over the past eight years, we aren't even close to that kind of security. Shelter in place and stay and defend are pipe dreams, just like the wildfire buffer that Eldridge Renewal, the SDC's prospective developer, has drawn around the thousand homes it hopes to pile on the land. The buffer is a comforting concept on paper, but absolutely meaningless to flaming

Nature – from page 7

downing, the late-day confusion and agitation that many families find challenging.

Green spaces are good for the mind, too. Studies have shown that just 20 minutes in a park, garden, or along a walking path can lower stress hormones, reduce blood pressure, and boost feelings of calm. Walking outdoors engages the senses — the sound of birds, the smell of flowers, the feel of a breeze — which stimulates the brain in a way that indoor environments simply can't match.

This idea — that connecting people with nature promotes well-being — is at the heart of biophilic design. Biophilic design intentionally brings elements of the natural world into our built environment through natural light, views of greenery, use of wood and stone, and easy access to outdoor spaces. Research shows this approach can lower stress, improve sleep, and create a sense of comfort — especially valuable for older adults and those living with cognitive changes.

The good news is that you don't have to be an architect or designer to benefit from biophilic principles. At home, you can open curtains in the morning to let in light, bring houseplants or fresh flowers indoors, or create a quiet chair near a window where you can enjoy the view. Taking advantage of local walking paths, vineyard trails, or neighborhood

embers lofted by gale-force winds into even the most well-prepared neighborhoods.

Evacuation remains the best choice, both instinctively and intellectually, for all humans living in the WUI, including those of us living in Glen Ellen and Kenwood. Planning and home hardening and buffering will save lives and property, but Trevor Smith, fire marshal with Sonoma Valley Fire District, was clear when I asked him about stay and defend: When the evacuation order comes, residents should get out.

"Leave the firefighting to the professionals," Smith said. "Stay and defend is not recommended."

As stakeholders — elected officials, county planners, state bureaucrats, hopeful developers, environmental nonprofits, community advocates — begin to negotiate mitigations for the significant environmental impacts SDC's redevelopment will impose, public safety needs to be foremost. We need to plan for the worst; not for the hopeful, not for the untested, not for the wealthy.

The red fox mama, saddled with her kits, knew evacuation was not an option. We humans, saddled with our hard-earned experience, must reconcile with evacuation as our only option. We must plan for it.

For more information on evacuation protocols, check CalFire's Go! Evacuation Guide: [www.readyforwildfire.org/prepare-for-wildfire/go-evacuation-guide/#guidanceiftrapped](http://www.readyforwildfire.org/prepare-for-wildfire/go-evacuation-guide/#guidanceiftrapped).

parks just a few times a week can amplify these effects — supporting both mental clarity and emotional well-being.

As we age, our connection to the natural world becomes not just a pleasure, but a prescription for brain health. The sights, sounds, and rhythms of nature remind us to slow down, breathe deeply, and be present. In doing so, we give our minds and bodies a chance to reset, restore, and thrive.

Dr. Raj Kalra is a board-certified physician in Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation, Pain Medicine, Lifestyle Medicine, and Obesity Medicine. He is the founder of Aroha Memory Care by MD Senior Wellness, a wellness-focused memory care community in Santa Rosa set to open later this year. Aroha is designed to provide seniors with a warm, person-centered environment that blends evidence-based care with lifestyle medicine principles and meaningful connection. For more information or to join the waitlist, visit [www.arohamemorycare.com](http://www.arohamemorycare.com).

Puzzle Answers – from page 4

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