

THE FOOTHILLS SUN- GAZETTE

City, non-profit open the door for homeless solution

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Visalia – Homelessness isn't a problem for just the individual, it is a social problem that affects neighborhoods and afflicts entire cities. While most cities turn their backs on the problem, shooing those displaced by mental health, job loss or addiction beyond their boundaries, the City of Visalia is attempting to address the issue one individual at a time.

On July 6, Self-Help Enterprises unveiled its latest project to revitalize the area surrounding Oval Park in Visalia. The private non-profit, which provides housing for low income residents throughout the Valley, celebrated the rehabilitation of a five-unit housing complex on Strawberry Street. While four of the five homes were already occupied, one was set aside through C-SET to provide housing for the homeless, the first of its kind in Visalia.

Tom Collishaw, president and CEO of Self-Help Enterprises, said the housing unit was more than 40 years old and falling apart but is now a cornerstone to revitalizing the neighborhood. Collishaw said Self-Help is also working to rehab four other homes within a half mile from Oval Park.

"These projects could make a significant impact on this area of north Visalia," he said. "Homeownership is key to stable communities."

The project was a partnership between Self-Help and the City of Visalia. Collishaw said the City used \$390,000 in HOME funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to fund the majority of the project. Self-Help Enterprises added another \$170,000 to the rehab project with Union Bank donating \$10,000 and leading a list of donations from private companies.

The project is twofold because it not only kick-starts redevelopment of the area, but also takes homeless people off the street, which also improves the atmosphere of the area. And it comes at a crucial time as homelessness is on the rise in Visalia. According to the Visalia Police Department, calls for complaints for the homeless have risen from 200 in 2008 to 3,600 in 2015. During its budget meetings last month, the Visalia City Council admitted that the city has had an "increase in homeless [population]" primarily because most of the resources to assist the homeless for Tulare County are located in Visalia. The issue was even broached by the Tulare County Grand Jury in its 2016 report, titled "Homeless, Hopeless and Helped Less." City staff noted there is little the City can do to curb the problem because it is not illegal and there are too many factors that play into the issue.

Councilmember Bob Link suggested putting money into the budget to address the issue and Mayor Steve Nelson suggested building transitional homes is one solution that has worked in other parts of the country and Strawberry Street is the first project to take on the trend.

"If we can transition two or three people off the street, then they could start looking for a job and transition into a rental and possibly even own a home at some point," Nelson said. "This is the beginning for a neighborhood and can create momentum for others to fix up their own property."

Nelson said getting one homeless person off the street actually accomplishes several others goals. He said projects like Strawberry Street revitalize neighborhoods by improving housing in the area, and some of that housing gets homeless people off the street and possibly back on their feet.

"If you can take one person off the street every day, than that is a successful program," Nelson said. "You can't do it in bunches, that's just not practical."

But the City is trying to identify projects that could provide several units of housing for the homeless instead of just one. Collishaw said Self-Help is already constructing a 36-unit apartment complex on Highland Street south of Fairview School. Called Highland Gardens, Collishaw said the \$8 million project is the largest ever done by Self-Help in Visalia. It will also be among the most sustainable projects as there will be a "high level" of energy efficiency in each unit as well as a central garden where residents can grow their own food. The project will also include an on-site community center and playground.

Mayor Nelson said, "If we can get a percentage of every low-income housing project to address this issue, than we can make a huge impact on our neighborhoods."

Rhonda Haynes, housing specialist for the City of Visalia, said both projects are part of the City's five-year plan to address the homeless problem. In addition to finding grant funding to help construct low-income housing, Haynes said the City is also getting ready to request proposals from non-profits interested in running the City's case management to help displaced residents find a new home.

"This is one of City's priorities moving forward," Haynes said.