

THE SUN-GAZETTE

Visalia finds a home for homeless shelter

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By: Reggie Ellis

City Council approves CSET's plan to build a 100-bed shelter just east of the Riverway Sports Park

VISALIA – Three months ago, the Visalia City Council vowed to open a homeless shelter in the next two years. Three days ago, they announced a location.

At its June 21 meeting, the Visalia City Council awarded just under \$5 million in funding to Community Services Employment Training (CSET) and approved agreements for the nonprofit to develop and operate the shelter. The 100-bed facility is being built on 3 acres east of Riverway Sports Park across Highway 63 (Dinuba Boulevard). Councilmember Brian Poochigian noted the project was located just west of where massive homeless encampments have popped up along the St. John's River and should help alleviate issues with homelessness for residents living on St. John's Parkway, who have been asking the city for action for years.

"Putting this here, can get those people out of the river and into here and help get them out of this part of our community," Poochigian said. "I will be supportive of this tonight."

The only opposition voiced at the meeting came from Valley homebuilders who accused the city of trying to circumvent public scrutiny by burying the item on the consent calendar instead of holding a public hearing.

Walter Diamond, director of land development with Lennar Homes, said the company has owned the property just north of the proposed shelter for three years. He said the issue of homelessness was important to the company and said they would have liked to offer input on the project but were unaware of the project.

"I haven't heard anything about it," Diamond said.

Matt Backowski, who is working on Lennar's River Island Ranch subdivision, said they were under the impression the site was for an affordable housing project. He said they were not given advance notice of the shelter site and only found out about it after reading an article in the newspaper.

"We were informed it was a low-income or affordable housing project but instead is a low barrier shelter, and that is fundamentally different," Backowski said. "We ask you remove this from the consent calendar and bring the community together to discuss it."

Also opposing the project was Brian Todd, head of the Building Industry Association of Tulare/Kings Counties, a nonprofit representing builders, developers and subcontractors. He said he was "surprised" and found it "odd" the item was on the consent calendar, typically for items deemed routine and which are approved in a single motion unless they are pulled for discussion at the request of a councilmember or the public. Todd said he was not only concerned for those who have already bought lots in the Lennar subdivision but also the homeowners who are already living near the homeless shelter.

“These are all questions that could have easily been vetted and talked about at least in a public hearing at a council meeting,” Todd said.

Mayor Steve Nelsen chastised Lennar for insinuating the project was being done in secret and said the council made the shelter a priority at its strategic planning meeting in January, issued a request for proposals to operate a shelter in March and have had numerous meetings on the issue since.

“It’s been in the paper quite a bit we wanted a low barrier shelter within two years,” Nelsen said.

Mary Alice Escarsega-Fuchner, executive director of CSET, said her organization left voice mails and sent emails to two staff members at Lennar Homes a month before Monday’s meeting and did not hear back.

Former mayor and longtime local businessman Bob Link said he was “disappointed” Lennar did not respond to the efforts made by CSET and TC Hope, which Link became involved with after his time on city council. He urged the council to move forward with the project after the city has spent countless months trying to find a suitable location.

“This project will not only administer to the needs of those that are homeless ... but also offer a place for the police department to bring the homeless to a place where they can stay,” Link said.

City planner Paul Bernal explained the shelter was a “by right” development, meaning it never triggered the need for a public hearing or a conditional use permit because the property is already zoned for commercial mixed use, which the center identified as an acceptable zoning for a low barrier shelter in compliance with a new state law passed in 2019.

“We can’t apply discretion at this point in the process,” Bernal said. “If the applicant was not able to be in compliance, then we would kick it into a conditional use permit process.”

Councilmember Brett Taylor said it is better to have homeless in the area being housed in a shelter rather than sleeping along the back fence of Lennar’s development.

“There’s nothing we can really do,” Taylor said.

Councilmember Greg Collins made the motion to approve the funding and agreement with CSET for the shelter. It was seconded by Poochigian and passed unanimously.

READY, CSET, GO

The Visalia City Council issued a request for proposal (RFP) on March 22 of this year to find a qualified non-profit organization for the development of the low-barrier shelter. After the April 28 deadline the city received proposals from CSET and Elevate Community Service. Ultimately the Visalia evaluation committee reviewed and scored both proposals and selected CSET.

The shelter will be construction on the east side of Dinuba Boulevard across from Riverway Sports Park on a site of approximately three acres to be donated by Self-Help Enterprises (SHE). The property is bordered by Glendale Avenue on the north and Court Street on the east and is zoned Commercial Mixed Use, which permits an emergency shelter as a by-right use. The existing parcel is approximately 6 acres and SHE plans to develop rental housing on the southern half.

The site is immediately south of St. John’s Parkway, where many of the city’s residents experiencing homelessness currently spend time. Encampments are located there and along the Modoc Trail less than a mile to the south. The Bethlehem Center is a little more than a mile down Route 63. Other

providers of services to the homeless like Visalia Emergency Aid Council, Salvation Army, CSET's main office and the Samaritan Center are also nearby on or near Route 63. Measured directly, the Visalia Rescue Mission is less than two miles away, and the Visalia Transit Center is slightly more than two miles. These agencies among others provide the requisite continuum of housing and services made available to this project.

The area surrounding the soon-to-be shelter is undeveloped so perceived conflicts with existing uses would be avoided. The site would be developed such that only the façade would be visible from the Dinuba Boulevard side; parking and access is expected to be on the eastern part of the property.

The proposed site plan and building design are being coordinated by TC Hope and its members who have extensive experience with development of large public facilities. Serving as advisors for this project are Matt Ainley, principal civil engineer for 4Creeks, and Harvey May, semiretired local developer.

The TC Hope for the Homeless Center would be of steel construction and have about 20,000 square feet of building space, single-story with an eave height of 18 feet. Fire sprinklers would be installed. Amenities would include sleeping quarters accommodating 100 beds, restrooms with showers, kitchen and dining facilities, offices and meeting rooms, a laundry, bicycle storage and storage for personal items, a playground, pet shelter and parking. The area breakdown would be as follows: 2,240 square feet of general office space; 6,070 square feet of assembly area; 2,930 square feet of residence area; 1,414 square feet of storage; and the remainder in restrooms and showers. The facility would be flexibly designed to accommodate sleeping arrangements suitable for an ever-changing mix of clients, with consideration given to gender and to keeping families together. The assembly area can be configured to function as a warming and cooling center in extreme weather. The paved parking area will be sufficiently large to accommodate a safe parking program for those staying in their vehicles overnight.

The conceptual design for the TC Hope for the Homeless Center is very similar to the 40 Prado Homeless Services Center in San Luis Obispo that opened in October 2018. In addition to emergency shelter space, the proposed Center would have room for a warming and cooling center, recognizing the additional need for protection from extreme weather among the many homeless in Visalia who are unsheltered. During the mid-winter night of Jan. 21-22, 2020, when the last Point in Time count was taken, 312 of the persons surveyed slept in unsheltered locations in Visalia, while only 94 had access to emergency shelter. A total of 540 homeless persons were identified in Visalia and 167 of them were considered chronically homeless. More than half of the 992 homeless counted in all of Tulare County were found in Visalia.

Project development and construction is expected to begin next month and go through December 2022. An opening date is expected for January 2023.

Visalia approved several different funding sources to build and operate the center. According to the agenda item the council authorized over \$2 million in community development block grant (CDBG) funds for the low-barrier shelter, authorized \$2.1 million of permanent local housing allocation (PLHA) funding and \$800,000 in successor agency housing (SAH) funds toward the development and operation of the shelter.