

ABC 30

VISALIA'S FIRST LOW-BARRIER HOMELESS SHELTER COULD OPEN BY EARLY 2023

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By: Brian Johnson

Visalia, Calif. (KFSN) -- Plans are in motion to build a large low-barrier homeless shelter in the South Valley's biggest city.

Visalia officials recently chose CSET, a non-profit that fights poverty, to take the lead on establishing the shelter.

"A low barrier shelter is meeting people where they're at," CSET Executive Director Mary Alice Escarsega-Fechner said. "It doesn't create requirements for them to come in. Certainly, they need to be safe, there's expectation of rules, but the goal is that people have a safe place to sleep and that you can begin to create access to other services in the community."

The shelter will be located on land east of Dinuba Boulevard, across the street from Riverway Sports Park and just south of a new Lennar home development.

Visalia City Manager Randy Groom says there have been some concerns raised by a home developer and residents.

But he points out that the shelter has the right to be there because of how the property is zoned.

Plus, a long-term solution is needed to help the hundreds of people experiencing homelessness in the city.

"We've been working to kind of keep the villages from developing, which our residents have been very appreciative of," Groom said. "But it doesn't mean that we've found a place for these folks to go or to get services. So this provides that piece of the puzzle that really provides them with positive outcomes rather than just moving them around."

The city will contribute \$5 million from three funding sources towards the development and operation of the shelter, which will include 100 beds, restrooms with showers, dining facilities, storage space, and a place for pets.

It will be modeled on an existing homeless services center in San Luis Obispo.

"Folks experiencing homelessness, they're our brothers, they're our sisters, they're our moms, they're our dads, they're relatives, they're friends," Escarsega-Fechner said. "These are all human beings as well and everyone should have access to a place to sleep with dignity and respect."

CSET isn't working alone.

A number of other agencies will be involved in the project, such as TC Hope and Self-Help Enterprises.

The goal is to open the shelter by January 2023.