

# VISALIA TIMES DELTA

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## Visalia council approves \$5M for 100-bed homeless shelter near Riverway Sports Park

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By: Joshua Yeager

After years of planning, Visalia's first low-barrier homeless shelter is now on the horizon after council members unanimously approved \$5 million to construct a 100-bed facility near Riverway Sports Park.

The proposal would bring a shelter that serves the city's estimated 540 unhoused people to an undeveloped lot north of the Dinuba Boulevard Target. The approval comes months after the Visalia City Council pledged to see a low-barrier navigation center operational in the city by 2023.

The proposed shelter is expected to open in January 2023.

While the city is contributing money to the project, CSET and a coalition of service providers would be in charge of the shelter's operations and maintenance. They would bring \$7.9 million in additional funding for a total \$12.9 million budget. That figure includes construction costs and three years of operations.

A key partner in the project, TC Hope, has spearheaded local efforts to bring a low-barrier shelter to Visalia. The council ultimately selected their proposal to receive the grant funding. The proposal will closely mirror 40 Prado, a successful shelter that has operated in San Luis Obispo since 2018.

The low-barrier designation means the shelter will accept anyone. The facility will include a kitchen area, bathrooms, showers, and comprehensive case management and employment opportunities.

Once complete, police will also have the option to move unhoused people from parks and public places to the shelter, provided there are vacancies. People coming into the shelter would stay between three and six months before transitioning into permanent supportive housing.

"One of the things that will be unique about our shelter is we don't kick people out in the morning. The shelter will be open all day, so during the evening, they'll have a place to sleep, they'll have a place to get meals — but they'll also have services that will be available to them," said Mary Alice Escarsega-Fechner, CSET executive director.

That means there won't be people loitering in the area during the day, said Betsy McGovern Garcia with Self Help Enterprises, a Visalia-based nonprofit partner in the shelter project.



A parcel north of Target on Dinuba Boulevard and across from Riverway Sport Park has been proposed as the site to build TC Hope for the Homeless Center.

Self Help is currently developing a 90-unit affordable housing complex adjacent to the proposed shelter. Her organization is committed to being a "good neighbor" and keeping the area well-maintained, McGovern Garcia said.

"This is beginning to create an open door where people can come and receive services with dignity and respect ... and hopefully start to move that needle," Escarsega-Fechner said.

Not everyone was as enthusiastic about the proposal, however.

Lennar Corporation, one of the nation's largest homebuilders, said the Visalia council did not allow the public to weigh in on the proposed shelter and its location.

Lennar is developing a subdivision next to the proposed site and company representatives feared that the shelter could affect home sales and property values.

"Just because it's a free site doesn't mean it's the right site," said Matt Backowski, a local Lennar representative. "It's unfair to neighboring homeowners, to those preparing to move in, and even to this council if we don't bring the community in to be able to be heard and give feedback."

Project managers countered that they had reached out to Lennar multiple times via phone calls and email messages in the month leading up to Monday's meeting. Former Visalia Mayor Bob Link, who now sits on the TC Hope board, said Lennar was not responsive to requests to meet and discuss details.

"I'm disappointed that Lennar either refused or chose to overlook the fact that we did want to sit down with them and try to figure out what they thought was best," Link said. "I encourage you [the council] to go forward with this project. It's something the community needs and will help a great deal of people who are today unhoused."

Council members pointed out that the subdivision and nearby homes are already affected by homeless people living along the river. The proposed shelter will help address neighbors' concerns around homelessness, not worsen them, the council said.

"The city needs something like this because right now there's a homeless problem on the river. By putting this [shelter] here, we can get people out of the river and into a secure location... that benefits the neighbors in this community," Councilman Brian Pochigian said.

City planners added that the shelter is allowed by-right, meaning that city leaders cannot deny low-barrier shelters in the mixed-commercial use zone because of a 2019 California law meant to address the state's growing homeless and affordable housing crisis.

"That's something I wanted people to understand that this is allowed by-right. There's nothing we can really do," Councilman Brett Taylor said. "At the end of the day, the biggest issue that I am reminded about is the homeless population that we have and taking care of them. We are getting pressure from all of my constituents, from all the citizens of this community to help solve this problem."

Visalia Mayor Steve Nelsen acknowledged that "no location is perfect" but applauded the work that city staff and community partners put into the shelter proposal while dismissing criticisms that the council was not transparent.

"I will not grab into the idea we're not transparent because it's so far from the truth I won't even dignify that with any more answers," he said. "This program has the opportunity to change lives, and I will not stand in the way of making that happen."