

THE SUN GAZETTE

VISALIA NEEDS MORE LOW-INCOME HOUSING



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City will use one-time housing funds to create studio and one-bedroom units for the homeless, those at risk of becoming homeless.

VISALIA – In Visalia, housing of any kind is hard to find.

There aren't enough homes for sale or for rent, studio and multi-room apartments are in short supply and there aren't enough beds of any kind to get homeless people off the streets. With all of those competing factors, the city of Visalia wasn't sure what to do with \$1.8 million it received in housing, or HOME, funding through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

Ultimately, the council decided to use the funding to create more one-bedroom or studio rentals to house those who are homeless and create affordable options for individuals one bill away from becoming homeless.

Margie Perez, housing specialist for the city, said the HOME ARPA funding is intended to reduce homelessness and increase housing stability for domestic violence and human trafficking victims, those at risk of becoming homeless and people earning less than half of the median income in Tulare County. Furthermore, the money could only be spent in one of four ways: Development of permanent, affordable housing; non-congregated shelters; tenant based rental assistance; or supportive services.

As part of the funding, the city was required to consult with the Kings/Tulare Homeless Alliance, Tulare County Housing Authority, as well homeless advocacy groups and domestic violence nonprofits to assess the needs of these vulnerable populations.

A survey of 76 local nonprofits and government workers showed two thirds of respondents said affordable rental housing is the greatest need in Visalia. About 1 in 8 respondents said the greatest need was in single-room shelter units or supportive services. More than half said the city needed studio or one-bedroom apartments while less than a quarter said 2-3 bedroom units.

"I'm just at a loss of why the majority of the folks were indicating that it should be a single unit?" councilmember Greg Collins asked.

Perez said most families do not fall into the extremely low income category of less than 30% or even 50% of the area median income because they are usually at least two people with incomes for households looking at 2, 3 and 4 bedroom units.

"Usually when their families they're closer to the 80% area median income," Perez said. "And if we are doing income eligibility for house a family that is at 80% they will not be eligible."

Almost half said the homeless were the population of greatest need followed by 16% who said residents at risk of becoming homeless and 14% who said extremely low-income residents. Nearly 45% agreed higher rents are the number one issue limiting housing options, followed by just under 16% who said a lack of wheelchair accessible units or no vacancies.

"Staff recommends the development of permanent affordable rental housing due to non-congregated shelters unable to leverage additional funding, tenant based rental assistance is difficult to spend due to the regulations, the lack of affordable units, and supportive services is recommended in conjunction with another activity," the staff report stated.

Perez said affordable rental housing could be leveraged with other funds allowing the city to make a greater impact. In Visalia's case, that meant an additional \$900,000 in successor housing funds, giving a potential project a budget of \$2.7 million. Other potential funding sources include California Housing and Community Development funding and grants to remodel existing buildings or construct new projects where development already exists, known as infill grants.

Vice mayor Brian Poochigian asked if there was any way to use the money to provide more supportive services to these vulnerable populations.

"I kind of see it as giving someone a tool, but not showing them how to use it can't be the support services kind of helps individual out all providing affordable housing at the same time," Poochigian said. "So for me, I'd like to see some kind of balance between those two."

Perez said those applying could be encouraged to include supportive services in their proposals. She went on to say when homeless are able to find stable shelter it is recommended they receive ongoing case management for the first two years.

Councilmember Greg Collins agreed those who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless would greatly benefit from additional services but many people aren't in need of supportive services, they are simply being priced out of the rental market. He suggested putting a priority on affordable housing developers, such as Self Help Enterprises, which include community rooms in their projects where they can offer services to tenants.

Mayor Steve Nelsen said he wanted to make sure the location of the projects would be included in the proposals because the city has “a bad habit of putting everything on the east side of the city. So, I’ll be watching for that.”

Councilmember Liz Wynn amended her motion to “strongly encourage” supportive services when they send out the request for proposals. The motion was seconded by Collins and passed 4-0, as Councilmember Bret Taylor was absent. Nelsen appointed Wynn and Collins to serve on the committee to review the proposals.