

# THE FRESNO BEE

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## Council candidates' quandary: How to help the homeless into the 'Clovis way of life'

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The 75-unit Butterfly Gardens supportive housing project in Clovis. It consists of one-bedroom, one-bath apartments that will be rented to homeless people and those with disabilities. TAD WEBER  
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A recent forum for Clovis City Council candidates featured the broad themes of supporting police and firefighters, smart growth for the future and helping small businesses thrive.

And there was the requisite homage to the city's "Clovis way of life" slogan.

It was in that context that the candidates made it clear how much they valued their city. Even with a population of about 122,000, the candidates said they love the small-town atmosphere that Clovis fosters, especially in its Old Town, and how they aim to uphold that feel.

The majority made it clear that their town was distinct from "that city to the west" that had no such vibe — namely, Fresno.

People move to Clovis for its low crime rate and good schools, the candidates agreed, offering more contrast with the urban neighbor.

Then they were asked about helping people who are homeless in Clovis, and a funny thing occurred.

Many of the candidates cited the sheltering of homeless people done by the Fresno Mission and Poverello House and stressed how they would rely on those programs for assistance.

Both are located in downtown Fresno.

That point stuck out to me as unintended irony by candidates hoping to become the next generation of Clovis leaders. At one moment, they were sure to point out how Fresno is unlike their town. But in the next breath, they were quick to seek the help of two key Fresno nonprofits to solve a social problem in their city.

It made for an all-too-Clovis moment: Boasting of the city's supposed superiority over Fresno while relying on programs in their neighbor to deal with a social need.

Here's the real question the candidates need to wrestle with: How can their "way of life" include a Clovis-specific approach to the homeless in their city?

### **HOW MANY HOMELESS IN CLOVIS?**

Just how many homeless people are in Clovis is unclear. The point-in-time count done last February showed more than 4,000 homeless people in Fresno and Madera counties. (The only cities broken out were Fresno and Madera.) Clovis Unified tallies around 60 families-students doubling up, living in motels or in temporary shelter this school year (the district includes parts of north Fresno).

The candidates got to the topic of homelessness when Buchanan High School senior Saiya Sohal was invited to ask a question at the forum.

"The homeless population has increased, with pandemic protocols and economic constraints placing a greater strain on our society to respond," she said. "How do you plan to care for the growing number of unhoused people in Clovis in a manner that respects their humanity?"

Answering first was incumbent Drew Bessinger, who is seeking a new term. He mentioned having experience with homeless people starting in the early 1980s when he was a police officer in Santa Barbara, a temperate coastal town that has long had people living on its streets.

"A lot of them (those homeless) come here because it is safer for them here than Fresno," he noted. Bessinger said how a number of those who are unhoused have mental illness or addictions, and when they refuse to comply with police orders, the officers are duty bound to deal with them.

"We can do the carrot, but we also have to do the stick, and that's unfortunate," he said.

Some other candidates followed suit. Diane Pearce said she supports services like addiction counseling and mental-health help. However, "for those people who refuse those services, they need to know that Clovis isn't going to put up with that kind of behavior. And they can find somewhere else that will."

Only one of the eight candidates, Guy Redner, offered what I thought was an adequate answer to Saiya's question. "Other communities have implemented a housing-first program, and I think that is a program we can implement," Redner said. "What that means is they get a roof, a bed and somewhere safe to stay."

### **BUTTERFLY GARDENS ABOUT TO OPEN**

Interestingly, none of the candidates brought up Clovis' first supportive housing project.

It is called Butterfly Gardens. Located at Willow and Holland avenues, the 75-unit, \$19 million apartment project is being built by low-income housing developers UPholdings and Self-Help Enterprises. A range of government funding, including \$300,000 from Clovis, is helping pay for the project.

Butterfly Gardens is based on the housing-first model, according to Jessica Hoff Berzac, co-founder and principal of UPholdings. Tenants are placed in the housing first and then can seek help with their illness or drug addiction, rather than having to clear those hurdles to get into a unit.

The project consists of one-bedroom, one-bath units, is nearly completed and is fully rented. It will start taking tenants in coming weeks. Besides those who are unhoused or at risk of becoming so, Butterfly Gardens will provide shelter to renters with disabilities.

Very-low-income people are intended to be tenants; how much they pay depends on their earnings. Suffice to say, rents will be well below market rate.



Inside the Butterfly Gardens supportive housing project in Clovis. TAD WEBER [tweber@fresnobee.com](mailto:tweber@fresnobee.com)

Besides housing, services for tenants battling addiction or suffering mental illness will be part of the plan. There will be staff on hand 24 hours a day, and tenants will be able to use a computer lab and exercise equipment.

Emergency shelters like the Fresno Mission and Poverello House play a vital role toward helping homeless people from throughout Fresno County. Supportive projects like Butterfly Gardens are another valuable resource for those who have lived on the streets or are close to going there.

That said, city leaders need to find a truly Clovis way for helping people who do not have a home to call their own, as the issue of unhoused people will likely deepen. With inflation a reality and a recession becoming more of a possibility, economic pressures will force more people out of their residences.

Here is hoping the newly elected councilmembers will work with current members Lynne Ashbeck and Vong Mouanoutoua to implement wise strategies for the homeless that, in the words of Saiya Sohal, “respects their humanity.”