

LOCAL NEWS

San Bernardino votes 'reluctantly' to spend federal money on homeless



PHOTO BY SARAH ALVARADO

Brian Ferrin, 38, speaks to a friend at Seccombe Lake Park in June 2016. Ferrin has been living on the streets off and on since 1999. San Bernardino is attempting to help people find homes without attracting homeless people from other cities.

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SAN BERNARDINO >> The City Council voted Monday evening to loan \$880,000 in federal money to an affordable housing complex that will focus on homeless individuals, despite concerns that the project would ultimately attract more homeless people to the city and burden taxpayers.

The discussion began last Wednesday, but **council members voted to continue** discussion to Monday so they could get more clarity and assurance that the economically challenged city wouldn't unfairly shoulder its neighbors' burden.

That assurance came mostly from three sources: new language in the loan agreement saying that the project would give preference to people living or working in the city; a letter from Mayor Carey Davis calling on other cities to work on homelessness; and a list of existing subsidized housing developments in other cities.

The City Council had already approved the project itself, which is to convert 21 apartments on Golden Avenue near Highland Avenue into 38 permanent housing units for homeless and low-income individuals, along with supportive services such as job placement and mental health counseling. Monday's vote allows \$880,000 in HOME funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to be used as a loan to help the developer acquire the property.

Some of that money will then be repaid over the course of a 57-year loan for other San Bernardino projects that are eligible for HOME funds.

The vote was 4-1, with Councilman John Valdivia voting no. Councilman Fred Shorett abstained because he sits on the board of Housing Partners I, which received the loan. Councilman Henry Nickel was absent.

Both Councilman Benito Barrios and Councilwoman Bessine Richard described their votes as reluctant.

"I said that I would support this if they changed the language," Richard said. "And so because you guys changed the language – and this project is going to happen whether we approve (the loan) or not – I'm going to stick by my word and say since the language was changed I'm going to support it. Not happily, because of the way the loan is created. Fifty seven years – I'm not going to be here."

Barrios and Richard, as well as Valdivia, also said they resented that the decision came to the council at the 11th hour, preventing council members from exploring other possible uses. The funds originated in 2015, but must be spent by Aug. 31 or they'll be reclaimed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and staff said no other eligible projects in the city could spend the money by then.

The developers had previously said they would recruit homeless participants from the area of the project but that programs receiving HUD money couldn't prohibit non-residents.

The language of the new contract is similarly limited.

“To the maximum extent permitted by law and provided that the applicants meet standard screening standards for the Development, Developer shall give preference in the rental of units in the Development to residents of, and/or persons who are employed in or have been offered employment in, the City of San Bernardino and/or the unincorporated areas of the County,” it reads in part. “Notwithstanding anything to the contrary herein, nothing in this section shall require that said preferences be based on a minimum duration of residency or employment.”

Davis’ letter also steps well short of the “no vacancy” declaration that Valdivia requested at the previous meeting.

Instead, it says San Bernardino has made significant progress on homelessness by allocating funds for homeless solutions and encourages other cities to do the same.

“My hope is that as we continue working towards solutions, we will decrease the number of homeless in the region,” Davis wrote in the draft letter, the language of which was not discussed Monday. “I encourage you to continue working with our County, nonprofit partners, and your community members to implement solutions for homelessness.”

There has long been a tension in San Bernardino and some other local communities between those who favor an aggressive approach to helping people out of homelessness and those who believe offers of service are a “magnet” that attracts more homeless people from other communities.

Nickel, who expresses strong sympathy with the latter view, asked for a list of services provided by other cities to see whether San Bernardino was doing more than its share — and thus drawing more homeless.

Instead, Davis used it to suggest that the cities that provide resources to get people off the streets wind up with fewer total homeless people. He noted that three of the cities with the most voucher sites — San Bernardino with 13, Ontario with 13, and Victorville with 19 — had seen three of the biggest drops in the number of homelessness counted in 2017 compared to 2013. By contract, Redlands, with only two sites, saw a large increase over that time.


“There does appear to be some, not necessarily scientific correlation, but those cities that are doing something about this, addressing it, are seeing a decrease in their homelessness, and those cities that aren’t, are seeing an increase,” Davis said to Dena Fuentes, deputy executive officer of the County of San Bernardino Community Development and Housing Agency.

“Correct,” Fuentes replied.

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