

LOCAL NEWS

San Bernardino City Council to decide: Does spending federal money on homeless help?



Tents and makeshift shelters are set up near the homeless access center at Seccombe Lake in San Bernardino, CA on Tuesday, March 29, 2016. File photo. (Photo by Rachel Luna/The Sun)

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SAN BERNARDINO >> A meeting Monday will decide whether the city will spend \$880,000 of federal money on a plan to help homeless people here or return the money out of fears that it will ultimately attract more homeless people to the city and burden taxpayers.

The meeting, scheduled for 6 p.m. in the board room at 201 North E St., continues a City Council meeting Wednesday where council members said they wouldn't approve the plan until they got more answers.

The thrust of their questions: Will this project attract more homeless people to San Bernardino, burdening residents and discouraging business?

"After meeting with constituents, there were a number of concerns raised," said Councilman Henry Nickel. "There are remain concerns that as we build more facilities that accommodate these type of individuals, that it does attract more of those types of individuals to our community. It serves as a magnet to attract these type of individuals that seek services."

The City Council has 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. The total cost is estimated at close to \$4 million.

This \$880,000 would be used as a loan to help the developer acquire the property.

The nonprofit in charge of the project, Inland Empire Housing First Programs – Step Up, has projects in other cities and would house homeless people from those cities there, Kim Albers, the organization's vice president, said during the meeting.

"So I don't think in any way this particular project could serve as a magnet," Albers said, adding that outreach would focus on the area immediately around the project.

Councilman Jim Mulvihill added that the program is intensive and longterm — not an overnight shelter — making it unlikely to result in any new people on the streets, he said.

Nickel as well as Councilman John Valdivia and Councilwoman Bessine Richard expressed concern that San Bernardino was taking on the burden of other cities' homeless populations, attracting more homeless and focusing resources on that issue instead of attracting business.

That led Richard to suggest continuing the discussion later.

The city faces a relatively tight deadline: The federal HOME funds must be spent by Aug. 31, or they will be reclaimed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for use in other parts of the country, according to city staff.

A persistent concern among many in San Bernardino — as well as other cities like Redlands, where the number of homeless people counted rose this year — is that offering services to homeless people will draw people from other communities.

That's why the county intends to go to every city with a double-digit number of homeless people to bring them into the program and create a level playing field, the county's homelessness czar, Philip Mangano, [told the San Bernardino City Council](#) in April.

An update on other cities' efforts to address homelessness was promised for Monday's meeting, as is a draft of a letter from Mayor Carey Davis to other mayors saying he expected them to shoulder their share of the burden.

Davis noted that, according to Point In Time counts held each year, the number of homeless in the city has dropped from 908 people in 2013 to 491 in 2017.

“The efforts this city has been putting forward in addressing the homeless problem have been showing results,” Davis said. “The city has reduced its homeless population, according to the Point in Time count, by 46 percent.”

That remains significantly more than any other city in the county.

If it proceeds on schedule, the units would be available in August 2018.

Tags: **homeless**



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