

Winter shelter for homeless gets city approval, but key part of controversial plan is delayed

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The Sacramento City Council approved a controversial proposal Tuesday night to open a 200-bed winter homeless shelter near Del Paso Boulevard in North Sacramento.

After more than two hours of public testimony and City Council debate, the council voted unanimously to spend \$997,000 to lease a warehouse at 1900 Railroad Drive for a shelter that will operate from December to April. The city will partner with Volunteers of America to operate the 24/7 shelter and provide services to the homeless.

The council also approved funding for two existing homeless shelters in the River District north of downtown and a shelter serving young people in Oak Park.

An estimated 2,000 people were living outdoors during a one-night count of Sacramento County's homeless population conducted in January. Mayor Darrell Steinberg said more than 70 homeless people died outside in Sacramento last winter and said homelessness "has become a transcendent quality-of-life issue in Sacramento."

"We need more emergency shelter and triage," the mayor said. "Winter is coming."

Hours before the vote, Steinberg announced that a separate vote on another homeless shelter in North Sacramento was being delayed until early next year.

A vote to purchase a Regional Transit warehouse near Arden Way for a potential long-term shelter won't take place until after the RT board approves designating the property as a surplus site. The board is expected to take that vote at its November meeting.

The delay will give city officials time to prove to North Sacramento residents whether a homeless shelter can work without greatly impacting the neighborhood.

Residents of Woodlake and other North Sacramento neighborhoods have expressed anger at Steinberg and other city officials for clustering two homeless shelters in the area, arguing their part of the city is already impacted by the homeless population. Some residents are also angry that the city has not proposed other shelters throughout the city, especially in affluent neighborhoods such as East Sacramento, Land Park and Curtis Park.

Councilman Allen Warren, who represents North Sacramento, said he understood that "when you try to locate facilities like these, the impact they have can be problematic." But he said the city was developing security and maintenance plans to address community concerns and said the shelter proposal "is something to be commended."

"This is a problem and it's not getting better," Warren said. "By not putting it in and around your neighborhood, that does not make it better."

The mayor said homeless individuals living in North Sacramento would get priority for beds in the shelter. Steinberg also proposed spending \$175,000 to fund two police officers to provide security around the winter shelter and \$200,000 to local business and neighborhood groups. He also proposed launching a \$500,000 economic development fund to invest in projects in the neighborhood.

Some North Sacramento residents said the mayor's plan had eased their concerns, and people testifying in support of the proposal outnumbered opponents. But others said they were worried that those seeking shelter in the facility would wander around the neighborhood during

the day and that placing a shelter near Del Paso Boulevard would hinder revitalization efforts on the corridor.

“I just think North Sacramento is an outcast, an experiment in governance,” Woodlake resident Flor Gressel told the City Council.

North Sacramento neighborhood activist Sondra Betancourt said “warehousing people is not right” and questioned whether the city had the police officers and maintenance workers the mayor pledged for the area near the shelter.

“Do we already have those people in the workforce?” she asked. “The hiring process takes a long time.”

Bob Erlenbusch, the executive director of the Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness, said he was “shocked” to hear people oppose the plan. He said “some of (that opposition) is driven by fear, some of it by stereotypes and some of it by misinformation.”

“Let’s move on, let’s save lives,” he said.

Warren and the mayor still support converting the Regional Transit warehouse into a permanent homeless shelter with on-site services. That shelter would be part of a broader development that would also include an affordable housing apartment complex and retail linked to a nearby light rail station.