

'The solution to homelessness is housing': Salt Lake City sets aside \$30M to address homelessness, affordable housing

The Salt Lake Tribune, by Tony Semerad, First Published Oct 18 2016 08:42 PM

RDA funds » Money set aside to address affordability crisis, homelessness in Salt Lake City.

What began Tuesday as an urgent effort to find money for new homeless-services sites in Salt Lake City became a \$30 million budget overhaul, largely in the name of housing.

By diverting money from a series of spending proposals for the city's urban-renewal agency, members of the Salt Lake City Council amassed an \$11.8 million fund for buying property for at least four facilities to serve the homeless.

Those land purchases, likely to begin within weeks, are part of a state, county and city initiative to build new 150-bed facilities to alleviate conditions for the hundreds of people who gather around Salt Lake City's Rio Grande Street daily.

Then the City Council kept going.

Led by members Erin Mendenhall and Derek Kitchen, the council continued to pluck budget items from the city's Redevelopment Agency (RDA), eventually pulling out another \$21 million and putting it directly toward affordable housing.

The new funds are being taken from 23 separate line items aimed at projects across the city, ranging from smaller public art and park improvements to major initiatives and studies tied to development along North Temple, in the Marmalade District and downtown, among other areas.

Making available "deeply affordable housing," Kitchen said, trumped all other RDA priorities. "The point," he said, "is not to make a little dip, but a huge splash."

"The solution to homelessness is housing," the first-term councilman said sternly. "We can't talk about siting shelters without talking about housing."

The council and Mayor Jackie Biskupska have identified affordable housing as a top priority, in light of an estimated gap of 7,400 dwellings within reach of working-class, low-income and impoverished residents.

Earlier this year, Mendenhall proposed in an RDA meeting that at least a \$4.5 million fund would be aimed at offsetting land costs and allowing more city-backed affordable housing projects to be located on the city's east side.

The idea, she said then, is to place more disadvantaged residents in housing located in areas richer in economic opportunity.

That money is slated to be added to the newly created fund. Councilman James Rogers said the council would begin discussions on how to spend the new funds, possibly as soon as next week.

Mike Akerlow, the city's director of housing and neighborhood development, said some of it likely would go to a voucher program to help struggling residents stay in their homes by subsidizing rents.

Another portion, Akerlow said, could go toward creating a community land trust, aimed at encouraging and preserving affordable housing citywide.

Kitchen also urged that some of the funds be used for immediate relief for the chronically homeless people who are using the Road Home shelter on Rio Grande as permanent housing.

The council's moves caught some officials off guard. Minutes before the vote, a top Biskupska staffer asked for more time to review what impact the budget changes would have, especially for the city's newly bolstered initiatives for economic development.

David Litvack, Biskupska's deputy chief of staff, said the mayor also recognized the need for affordable housing. "But we're seeing this for the first time," he said. "We're asking for time to balance priorities."

Kitchen and Mendenhall said they would consider a delay only if Biskupska guaranteed to replace money taken away from the new affordable-housing fund with cash from other city sources.