

HOMELESS Mayor backs shelter plan

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Mardi Wormhoudt's proposal to go to City Council Tuesday

By JOAN RAYMOND

Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt will ask council members to look kindly on Catholic Soup Kitchen founder Peter Carota's efforts to use the soup kitchen on Mora Street for a temporary shelter for the homeless.

Wormhoudt said Thursday she will recommend council members request the city zoning administrator to "favorably consider" Carota's request for a 90-day permit for an overnight shelter at the soup kitchen.

The recommendation will be considered Tuesday.

It comes at a time when representatives of emergency shelters in the county say they have not been turning away women and children because of a lack of beds.

"We haven't had too many calls lately," said Debbie Hunter, the housemother for the New Life Center shelter on Fair Avenue.

Hunter said it is unusual during a cold weather spell like the one recently for the homeless not to be driven to the shelter.

Iola Gold, director of the Women's Crisis Support and Shelter Services, said her agency has not seen an increase in the number of women seeking emergency shelter.

Gold noted her agency only provides services to women in domestic-violence situations. But, she said, the agency usually gets phone calls from other women in crisis situations.

Those calls have slacked off recently, she said.

At a meeting Thursday of the shelter advisory project, including representatives from providers of emergency shelters, Gold said those present reported there is not a lack of beds for women with children.

"We're curious to find out why we have beds," she commented. "One of the policies is not to turn away women with children."

Reports about an availability of beds conflicts with testimony from street people at a Tuesday meeting of the City Council and Board of Supervisors. They said there were pregnant women on the streets without shelter.

Wormhoudt said her recommendation will include a condition that Carota's project give first priority to pregnant women and the elderly.

A second condition would require Carota to post names of other shelters at the soup kitchen so that the homeless "will be aware of all the options," said Wormhoudt.

Earlier this week, Carota announced plans for a permanent shelter at the St. Francis Catholic Housing Project had fallen through, because supporters no longer had an exclusive option to buy property for the proposed shelter at Golf Club Drive and River Street.

Carota said delays in getting city approval for the project had hampered the closing of escrow.

Carota said he wants to use the soup kitchen for a temporary shelter until another site can be found for a permanent facility.

The Golf Club Drive project had drawn opposition from residents in the North River Street area who said the shelter would be a public nuisance. Opponents lost an appeal filed against a Zoning Board decision to approve the shelter.

Led by former Zoning Board member and ex-planning commissioner Rick Santee, opponents had argued the Zoning Board had not followed its own rules in approving the shelter.

Carota had opposed a condition of the permit for that shelter which required his staff to meet with representatives from the county's shelter projects.

Wormhoudt said she met Thursday with Carota and also with Planning Director Peter Katzberger to discuss Carota's soup-kitchen proposal.