

Soup Kitchen coordinating housing for homeless

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SANTA CRUZ — Catholic Soup Kitchen founder Peter Carota and a band of modern-day Good Samaritans are moving forward with plans to open a new shelter and retreat for as many as 100 streetpeople.

Soup Kitchen organizers say they don't want to wait for action by city and county officials to open a shelter for the homeless who daily wander and sleep in the streets, parks and public buildings in the city and in mountain camps throughout the county.

While the Soup Kitchen hands out a hot meal each day to about 200 men, women and children, downtown merchants and residents continue to complain the presence of the streetpeople is bad for business and a disruption of the peace.

Carota, a former real estate agent who changed his life to work for the poor, said he is working with Catholic parishioners and members of other churches to establish an annex to the soup kitchen that would include showers, beds and meditation areas.

The project, called the St. Francis Cath-

olic Housing Project, will be funded through donations made to a non-profit corporation, according to Carota.

One possible site is a commercially-zoned parcel, offered for sale at \$250,000 through Wilson Bros. and Associates realty, at the corner of Golf Club Drive and River Street as it leads into Highway 9 at the city limits.

The site is "perfect, except for the price," Carota commented. There are a house and several other buildings on the property, located just below the open spaces of the green and sprawling Pogonip property — where streetpeople camp — and on a bluff above River Street and across from a Metropolitan Transit District bus maintenance yard.

The site is about one mile from the Mora Street soup kitchen.

Carota said the group has received a commitment for a \$30,000 private donation and has a potential \$35,000 interest-free loan.

Payments, estimated at \$3,000, would be made by the Soup Kitchen, St. Vincent De Paul and donations. The soup kitchen op-

erates on a \$3,000 monthly budget, but comes out ahead by \$1,000 per month due to donations, said Carota. That \$1,000 would be put to the new shelter and retreat.

"I don't want to mess around with banks if I can help it," added Carota.

If the plans become a reality, Carota

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said money would be saved by charity organizations now paying motel bills to house the homeless on an emergency basis.

Carota estimated there are now 300 persons in the homeless population he serves.

The new project would be "bed and breakfast" for the streetpeople, he said.

Women and children would be given first priority, followed by the elderly and the sick. The length of stay would be determined on a case by case basis, he said.

Carota added: "We would like to house all of them, but we are starting with 100 persons." He said the streetpeople population is 75 percent stable, with 25 percent of the faces changing from day to day, and week to week.

He said other sites are also being considered. The volunteers consider the Pogonip property a perfect site and have held meetings with members of a task force that is looking at ways to develop the property owned by the Cowell Foundation, a philanthropic organization.

But Carota said he is not hopeful of obtaining a commitment from Cowell for the use of the Pogonip property.

Working with Carota is Norma Claunch, a former director of nurses at Dominican Hospital.

Claunch is a board member of Citizens For Better Nursing Home Care and works from St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Capitola to take communion to shut-ins and nursing home residents.

"We are willing to lease, or rent or build to fulfill our intention of housing the homeless," said Claunch. "We are interested in getting a location that we can move on, and get started on this project."

She said the group would be interested in hearing from any persons who could help with a location — "not that we expect

any giveaways."

Claunch said the project is getting support from the City Council and Supervisors "only in the sense that we are not getting any negative comments."

The politicians "are very polite when they talk to us, but we don't see any action," added Claunch.

Claunch sees a task force on the homeless, as has been suggested by Councilwoman Katy Sears-Williams, as a "delay tactic" that will result in another study.

She also questioned the worth of a city and UC Santa Cruz-funded \$11,000 survey of the streetpeople population that is now in the works.

"To learn statistics and details is always very helpful, but you don't need a study to see that all the people out there on the street don't have a place to live. That's an obvious fact."

"My irritation with public officials," added Claunch "is that they have the ability to help more, and they haven't."

She sees the streetpeople issue as becoming "a political football - again."

Carota said politicians "haven't helped us, or hurt us. They're no problem."

The soup kitchen leader said retreat facilities are needed so that the streetpeople can have the peace and quiet necessary "to heal inwardly."