

Organizers lay out vision for sanctuary

Santa Cruz pair trying to gather support for homeless camp

Homeless

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SANTA CRUZ — The dream for a permanent campsite in Santa Cruz for homeless people got a lift Thursday with nearly 100 people attending a public forum at Santa Cruz High School to explore the proposal.

Homeless activists Stacey Falls, a high school science teacher, and Brent Adams, a documentary filmmaker, are trying to gather community support for a homeless campground that would give up to 50 folks a place to sleep and store personal belongings.

Though a location has not been identified, Falls and Adams are working to win support from local residents and politicians to make the camp a reality.

Estimates show there are 3,000 homeless people in Santa Cruz County with about half

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in the city, Falls said. With only 200 shelter beds available county-wide, too many people are sleeping on the streets at night, she said.

"Besides being illegal, it's not good for anybody to sleep in our bushes and doorways," Falls said. "The camp is a humane solution that will benefit everybody."

Former Aptos resident Art Edwards, who moved to El Dorado County and opened a homeless camp in Placerville called Hangtown Haven, offered insight from his experiences on how to get a similar camp off the ground in Santa Cruz.

Edwards said the first steps are to create a non-profit corporation, identify a piece of property, and secure financial support either from grants, loans or donations.

Edwards said political support is key.

"The mayor and police chief, you want on your side," he said. "You want the community's movers and shakers on your board."

Falls and Adams would like to find a half-acre for the camp, and enclose it with a 6-foot gated fence, which is staffed 24 hours a day.

The camp would be run with rules that include zero tolerance for violence, theft, and use of

drugs and alcohol. Quiet hours would be enforced at night.

Homeless camps exist in other cities, including Ventura, Eugene, Ore., and Olympia, Wash.

Paul Lee, a longtime Santa Cruz resident and homeless advocate who started the Homeless Garden Project in 1990, told the audience he was "ashamed to say" not enough has been done in the past 25 years to reverse the growing homeless problem.

Lee cited the county's high cost of housing as a major factor standing in the way of a solution.

"(The number of homeless) is off the charts and nobody has a plan," Lee said. "The campground is one way of meeting that need. It's the next great step in trying to meet that need to the extent we can."

City Councilman Micah Posner spoke favorably of the camp, saying he wants to try just about anything to end homelessness, but warned that the City Council with Lynn Robinson becoming mayor in November might be lukewarm in support of homeless causes.

"The next mayor tried to close the homeless shelter. It's a fact, you can look it up," Posner said. "The only way you get rid of the homeless is you house them. It's that simple."

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