

Sanctuary plan lacks traction

Homeless 200 8.5.14
Santa Cruz Sanctuary Village group seeks another solution

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SANTA CRUZ » Sure, an organized Santa Cruz tent city sounds like a good idea, said Sara Coon, who is homeless.

But would she be able to bring her dog? Would she need govern-

ment identification? Would there be a background check?

Sitting with Coon in the shade of a San Lorenzo Park cork tree Wednesday, homeless advocates Brent Adams and Stacey Falls shared details of their proposed homeless shelter, recently renamed Santa Cruz Sanctuary Village.

"You're not going to have anybody," said the 31-year-old Coon, her legs wrapped in a sheet and her Labrador-pit bull mix Kona curled at her feet. "The homeless don't like to have an ID. Having information, any little piece of it, can be dangerous. I've had my ID stolen twice."

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Homeless Sanctuary advocates Brent Adams, right, and Stacey Falls hear Robert Pherery's thoughts on the sanctuary.

KEVIN JOHNSON
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Homeless

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The concerns of the homeless are only one hurdle Adams and Falls face on the long climb to making their homeless sanctuary a reality. Thus far, they have yet to gain political traction and have many critics.

Officials note no formal proposal has been offered for either city or county consideration, and no location has been named. Also, many leaders associate Adams with his involvement in the extended Occupy Santa Cruz takeover of a River Street bank in 2011, though the case is in legal limbo.

Adams and other organizers said they do not expect to solve homelessness locally, merely to chip away at the problem. A sanctuary camp or village would serve as a first stepping stone on the path to self-supported housing. Adams said he hoped to offer a sort of "triage" for homeless people to regain their dignity and adjust to getting off the street.

In its latest incarnation, Sanctuary Village aims to use private property for housing an organized, enclosed and staffed tent encampment with about 25 people to start, and it would move about every 90 days. Participants would have to abide by agreed-upon rules, show IDs, stay off drugs and alcohol, and perform service to the camp, among other requirements.

Adams said the goal is to provide safe and legal shelter and invite substance abuse recovery groups but not duplicate other services offered by the Homeless Services Center, which include hygiene, mail and daily food service. Sanctuary Village also is expected to have an administrator for assisting in job searches and making referrals to other agencies.

Funding for the sanctuary shelter would come from fundraising initially. Later, Adams said, if the camp is successful at moving residents off the streets and into housing, the group might seek public backing.

Falls and Adams hosted a meeting July 29 at Loudon Nelson Community Center to answer questions about the proposal and respond to criticism levied in several forums online.



KEVIN JOHNSON — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Sara Coon talks with Stacey Falls and Brent Adams about her thoughts on letting pets into the Homeless Sanctuary as she sits underneath a tree with her registered service dog at San Lorenzo Park in Santa Cruz on Wednesday.

"We care about this community. We're doing this because we care," Falls told the group of 30. "We want to make sure that people understand we're not trying to hurt them or hurt the city."

'Not there yet'

But even those who spoke to the Sentinel in support of additional homeless shelter options said they believe the sanctuary idea is not ready for prime time.

"My sense is that it's probably just going to be a real uphill battle, because for a lot of us who are working on homeless issues and working to end homelessness, this doesn't look like the best place to put our resources," said Santa Cruz Vice Mayor Don Lane, chairman of the Smart Solutions to Homelessness Leadership Council.

Lane said he is putting his energy instead into permanent housing efforts. A local effort called 180/180 to place 180 people into permanent supportive housing by July exceeded its goal and has housed more than 200.

Santa Cruz City Councilman Micah Posner thinks asking where the homeless are supposed to sleep is a very important question for the community to consider.

"It's definitely scary for people. I think it forces people to deal with it head on, and it's really scary," Posner said of Sanctuary Village. "We have to have a modicum of consensus before I would agendize it. I just don't think we're there yet."

Homeless Services Center board member Rowland Rebele said there is not enough shelter space

in Santa Cruz and a monitored, drug- and alcohol-free place for the homeless "is a fine idea," he said. While supportive of the Sanctuary Village effort, Rebele said he is putting his energy and funding into a more permanent supportive housing solution.

"I don't know whether their plan is viable or not," Rebele said. "That's up to the City Council and the county Board of Supervisors if they decide to locate the movable or permanent camp in the county."

Santa Cruz Deputy Police Chief Rick Martinez said he is keeping a close eye on the project as it develops because it relates to one of the Police Department's largest enforcement burdens. Some 42 percent of all police arrests and 33 to 37 percent of all citations are of people who list the Homeless Services Center as their home address, he said.

Martinez said he is keeping an open mind to all possible homeless solutions but is not sure Sanctuary Village will pass muster in Santa Cruz.

"You ask yourself how is that going to help us as a Police Department to deal with these long-term problems that go with homelessness," Martinez said. "They're still talking a lot of theories, they don't have a location picked out, they don't have current leadership."

Strong opposition

A blog post last week by Santa Cruz business owner Helbard Alkhassadeh titled "Santa Cruz is About to Make a Horrible Mistake" on stabsantacruz.com helped stir the pot.

"Santa Cruz is on the brink of making what I

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— Stacey Falls, homeless advocate

believe to be the worst decision in its 148 years," Alkhassadeh wrote.

The piece was shared around social media and elicited dozens of letters to local elected leaders, Alkhassadeh and Sanctuary Village organizers. Alkhassadeh said he believes the camp would need official government oversight, and thereby require extra taxpayer funding that is not available.

"Instead of saying we need to focus on the homeless center we have right now and what we can do to make it better, we're saying let's build a camp," Alkhassadeh said. "It's not a freebie. This is a city. There are rules that we have to abide by. That's the thing, the hint of mild anarchism about the whole thing: 'We're going to take care of this on our own, thanks for trying Santa Cruz.'"

Santa Cruz City Councilwoman Pamela Comstock does not support the proposal, but thinks the public should monitor it because future council majorities might take a different view.

"Everything that I've read independently about encampments, they've turned out to be epic failures across the United States," Comstock said. "This isn't a legitimate plan; it doesn't have any legitimate traction from this council."

Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors Chairman Zach Friend said he has not seen support from colleagues to take up the sanctuary camp idea formally.

"I still don't think this is a solution. As a proposal it's been very polarizing," Friend said. "The best solutions aren't the ones that polarize the community so strongly. They're the ones that unite."

For more information on the effort, visit facebook.com/santacruzsanctuary.

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