

# County to look, again, at homeless

Task force to report back in October

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SANTA CRUZ — In 2003, local officials drew up a 10-year plan to end homelessness. It didn't work.

In the last decade, homelessness actually increased from about 3,300 people to more than 3,700, according to the most recent county homeless census. With that sobering fact in mind, the county is now funding another study that it hopes would have more success, seeking a broad range of insight into a problem that has vexed the region for decades.



LANE

"How do we take a good hard look at this issue of homelessness in Santa Cruz County and ask what do we want to do?" asked Santa Cruz Vice Mayor Don Lane. "I think we have to look at it more systematically, so that we're not just saying 'Let's add another program or move some money from this to that.'"

The county and local cities have invested much in affordable housing over the last decade, but the report failed on some goals, sometimes miserably, especially when it comes to housing. And it was written at a time of lower unemployment and less economic disparity, both of which conspire to make the upcoming study even more of a challenge.

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"We need to pull back as far as we can and look at things like why do people become homeless, the sources of homelessness, and can we prevent homelessness more rather than dealing with it after it happens," Lane added.

The new plan is a joint project of Smart Solutions to Homelessness, the Homeless Action Partnership and the United Way of Santa Cruz County. It will be overseen by a soon-to-be-named task force, which will report back to the county board of supervisors in October.

The failure of the 2003 plan isn't the fault of the document — when it comes to homelessness, there are much more significant forces at play. But almost all metrics are headed in the wrong direction: homelessness is up, new affordable housing units were slowed by the economic downturn and the local waitlist for subsidized housing, with more than 13,000 names on it, is nearly double what it was in 2003 — despite no additions since 2008.

"Our list was getting so large we had to close it," said Ken Cole, executive director of the Housing Authority of Santa Cruz County. "I could easily have 20,000 on that list."

The county is also grappling with the loss of redevelopment funds, which were cut by Gov. Jerry Brown in 2011 and had been a major catalyst for affordable housing projects.

Further, federal Housing and Urban Development funds to address homelessness are handed out based on a population-centric formula, leaving communities with outsized homelessness problems such as Santa Cruz with empty pockets. Last month, Lane sent HUD a letter that he hopes leads to a reconsideration of how the federal government spends money on the problem.

Homelessness is also an issue that splits Santa Cruz, with many fed up from waiting for any sign of progress. Analicia Cube, one of the founders of Take Back Santa Cruz, said the task force should take hard look at the local economy and why it's so hard to make a life in Santa Cruz County, including the lack of blue-collar jobs.

"It's virtually impossible to come out of homelessness, live in Santa Cruz and thrive," Cube said. "They have to look at the community and work that into the plan: They can't create a plan around fairies and rainbows. They have to base it in reality."

The sky-high cost of living here has always been an impediment to addressing problems related to pover-

ty. Several officials said the county needs to look at building more housing at the lower end of the market, even suggesting a renewed look at strict density rules, such as building height restrictions.

Peter Connery of Applied Survey Research, who studies homelessness issues, said more infrastructure is needed, especially when it comes to emergency housing.

"The problem is, it doesn't get much traction," Connery said. "It's not what the federal government wants to see. They see emergency solutions as Band-Aids. And they are, but it's still something that's necessary."

Julie Conway, the county's Housing Project Manager, said more permanent supportive housing is needed — housing that isn't a bridge to a better life, but is the better life — complete with social services to address issues people may be grappling with.

She and others said the county needs to create single points of contact for homeless people, distilling what can be a bewildering network of nonprofit and government programs into a one-stop shop.

"Better coordination is one of the things that needs to get talked about," Conway said.

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