

Shelter for the homeless faces its first test

8-5-85 Homeless to 1988

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SANTA CRUZ — Saying he wants to house the poor "in a dignified manner, as if they are Jesus," Catholic Soup Kitchen founder Peter Carota will seek city Zoning Board approval for a shelter and retreat for street people on the city's northern edge.

"We want to have a location that not only houses, but also gives the guest a chance to heal and feel love," Carota stated in a handwritten proposal to the city for a special use permit to give emergency shelter for up to 50 homeless persons.

The proposal has become the pivot point of a petition

war, with signatures being collected both for and against the project.

Zoning Board members will hold a public hearing on the proposal beginning at 7:30 p.m. Thursday at the council chamber in City Hall.

Carota said residents would sleep on "cleanable mats" on the floor. An existing workshop would be converted into a place for the street people to shower. Plans call for another building to become a chapel. Long-range plans call for a clinic.

Carota, who daily serves free meals to anybody who wants them at the St. Francis Soup Kitchen on Mora Street, also proposes two separate dormitories, one for men and one for women and children, on the site of a

candle factory in an industrial district. The factory has been used to produce candles that look like rainbows sitting on clouds.

Carota said four trained volunteer counselors would staff the shelter and stay there at night. How long each resident would stay would be determined on a case-by-case basis.

Residents would be individually screened at the Soup Kitchen before being given a ticket to stay at the shelter, Carota said.

The shelter would open each day at 5 p.m. and no one would be allowed in after 8 p.m. It would be closed at 9 a.m. the following morning.

Job referrals would be provided. There is a tentative

agreement for visits to the facility by county Mental Health Services staff, said city planners.

Certain areas would be set aside for sports and conversation, but silence would be the rule in other areas.

"Silence will be an important aspect to the project," said Carota, a former realtor who has dedicated his life to serving the poor.

Candle-factory operator and property owner Nevin Leder said the half-acre parcel is being sold for \$234,000. A house, factory, shed and an apartment on the site total 4,200 square feet.

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City Council members have indirectly endorsed the project.

Council members two weeks ago supported a Downtown Commission recommendation to endorse a privately run shelter away from downtown.

Commissioners had lauded the Soup Kitchen's "exemplary work." A recent UC Santa Cruz sociologists' report on the city's street people population — estimated to be as many as 300 persons — said Carota "is the only straight person who presently seems to have any moral authority within the community of street people." The report, called "Streetpeople and Straight-people in Santa Cruz," was released in April by a research team headed by sociologist William Friedland.

Planning Department staff members recommend permit approval for a six-month trial period, as long as the buildings can meet fire and building codes. They recommend another public hearing at the end of the trial period.

Neighborhood compatibility is a key issue. In a report to board members, planners said they believe Carota's "track record" at the Soup Kitchen attests to

his ability to run such a facility in a way that will benefit the community at large and not upset the neighborhood.

The property is not far from the railroad tracks — a main travel route for the homeless who camp along the San Lorenzo River and in the mountains.

Carota has agreed to clean up the grounds and garden before moving in.

Planning staff members said detailed plans for the chapel have yet to be submitted. They suggest the city zoning administrator be given the authority to approve chapel plans.

There is a real estate sale sign on the property, but Nevin indicated there should be no problem with an escrow closure, set for Oct. 1. The property has been removed from real estate multiple listings, he said.

In March, Carota and soup kitchen staff announced plans to raise enough money to buy property for a shelter and retreat, with hopes of eventually housing as many as 100 persons.

He and his supporters formed a non-profit corporation to funnel donations into the St. Francis Catholic Housing Project fund.

By June 23, Carota reported there were \$40,000 in cash reserves and \$45,000 in pledges.