

Sebastopol council approves ‘RV village’ plan for homeless people who live out of vehicles



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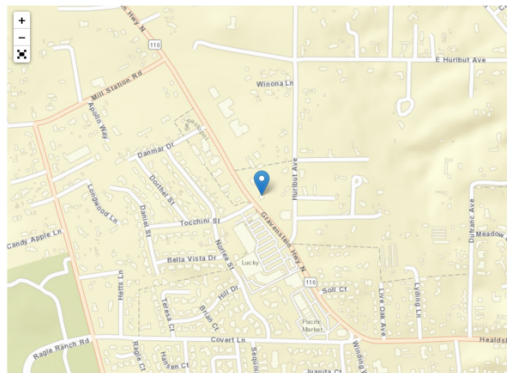
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Despite significant public pushback, the Sebastopol City Council on Tuesday unanimously approved moving forward with a plan for an “RV village” safe parking program for homeless people at a vacant property on Gravenstein Highway North.

Last month, the council authorized a [preliminary agreement](#) with Sonoma Applied Village Services, a nonprofit supporting homeless people, to run the one-year program on a city-owned lot near downtown at 425 Morris St. near a school and community center.

Following outreach to neighbors, school officials and business owners with various health and safety concerns, city staff last week recommended moving the planned pilot program about a mile away to a privately owned lot at 845 Gravenstein Highway North.



The safe parking program came largely in response to a growing encampment with over a dozen RVs on Morris Street. The hope is to move as many people as possible from the unsanctioned camp to the RV village, which could open as early as mid-January, before clearing Morris Street.

During a marathon six-hour special meeting Tuesday, neighbors voiced opposition to bringing homeless people into their neighborhood and expressed frustration over the abrupt change in the city's plan.

"I have really wrung my hands over this, the speed and the lack of public process or lack of engagement with the public through this process," said Mayor Una Glass during the meeting. "I'm losing sleep over it."

The reason for the site's quick approval is federal funding for the program is contingent on the city coming to a formal agreement with Sonoma Applied Village Services by Friday. The program would then be finalized in a council vote on Dec. 7.

For all of her reservations about lack of outreach, Glass said backing the program was a necessary step to alleviating homelessness in the city and the region.

"Hopefully we can take this (program) out of its temporary location and in the long run have this as a pilot project for other RV parking projects that we see throughout Sonoma County," she said.

While some neighbors attending the virtual meeting acknowledged the need for a safe parking program, most contended the new site is untenable. It's not far from the Joe Rodota Trail, where large, unauthorized homeless encampments have developed in years past, and less than a half-mile from the Sebastopol Independent Charter School.

"It is realistic that if this homeless village is approved, we can expect an increase of problems for our campus and new problems for our hundreds of Sebastopol families," said Chris Topham, executive director of the charter school.

To address those safety concerns, Adrienne Lauby, president of Sonoma Applied Village Services, said the program will have on-site security for the first 30 to 60 days it's open, as well as an all-hours hotline for neighbors to call and staff to respond to any issues.

"If there needs to be more security for a longer period time, we'll find the money to do it," said Lauby, adding she's skeptical private security is necessary at all. "Our goal is safety for the residents as well as safety for the neighborhoods."

Under the nonprofit's current proposal, the safe parking program would accommodate up to 22 RVs and between 20 and 40 residents, be open 24/7, and offer mental health and social services.

The one-year safe-parking program is estimated to cost \$598,541. Sonoma Applied Village Services has already received a federal pandemic stimulus grant of \$368,000 and is expecting additional public grants to cover most of the total expense.

The city will likely need to contribute an additional \$60,000 to pay for leasing the property, a former AmeriGas Propane store and parking lot. The St. Vincent de Paul Society of Sonoma County is in contract to buy the property, and should the sale go through, has agreed to lease the lot to Sonoma Applied Village Services.

Officials aim to cover that cost through the city's affordable housing fund. If that's not feasible, the city may need to dip into its reserve funds.

However, the council on Tuesday also approved a proclamation of a local homeless emergency, making it eligible for additional state funding that could refund those expenses, city officials said.

The potential cost to the city is still significantly less than the up to \$290,000 staff estimated it could have spent to make the original proposed site — a Public Works storage yard — safe for overnight parking, a key reason for the change.

Assuming 35 residents stay at the village, the per-person cost of the program would be around \$1,425 a month, or \$47 a day. That's significantly less than the cost of local efforts to shelter homeless people in tiny home villages or converted hotel rooms such as the former Sebastopol Inn, which often top \$100 a day.

Before any RVs can move into the village, the council committed to coming up with a plan to clear the encampment on Morris Street and update local parking regulations to prevent a similar RV camp from popping up elsewhere in the city.

A 2018 federal court ruling effectively prevents cities from clearing most encampments on public property throughout the West Coast without first offering shelter. That means any new overnight parking restrictions likely can't be enforced until everyone living in a vehicle on Morris Street has the opportunity to move into the planned village or other shelter.

The village would not be the first site in Sebastopol for people living out of RVs. The nonprofit West County Community Services manages a [once-vacant mobile home park](#) at 6665 Sebastopol Ave. that shelters formerly homeless families.

At Tuesday's meeting, Tim Miller, the nonprofit's executive director, said there have been very few security issues at the site. Miller said of the 31 formerly homeless people who've stayed at the park since opening four years ago, 19 have moved on to permanent housing.

"When people feel safe they become ready, with wrap-around services, to move on and get a job — in many cases, though not all — and to act like something they've wanted to for a long time, which is to be respected as community members and move on with their lives," he said.

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