

Santa Clara County property tax for homeless housing going to voters

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SAN JOSE -- In what advocates for the homeless are calling an "example for the nation," Santa Clara County leaders on Tuesday unanimously voted to place a bond measure on November's ballot that would raise nearly a billion dollars for affordable housing in coming decades.

While other municipalities have put affordable housing bonds on the ballot before -- San Francisco passed its own \$300 million bond last November -- the size of Santa Clara County's version and its dedication of funds to the most needy homeless population make it stand out, advocates said.

"This dollar amount is meant to be a game-changer and make a difference," said Amie Fishman, executive director of the Non-profit Housing Association of Northern California. "There's a really big limelight on the action that was taken today."



File photo: The property tax would raise about \$950 million over 30 years and cost homeowners about \$12.60 per \$100,000 in property value. The measure will require a two-thirds vote to pass, and supervisors were encouraged by a survey conducted earlier this year that found voters were concerned enough about homelessness issues to possibly reach such a threshold in November. (Patrick Tehan/Bay Area News Group archives)

The bond is the result of work by the county's Housing Task Force, which recommended finding a new source of revenue to allocate toward homelessness solutions. Previous ideas included a possible sales tax or making it part of the transportation tax that was recently advanced. But "those discussions didn't go well," said Dave Cortese, president of the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors.

"We ended up looking at each other and saying 'if we're going to see a housing measure, it's going to be up to us,'" said Cortese, who commended Supervisor Cindy Chavez for taking a lead role in getting the matter to the November ballot.

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and supervisors were encouraged by a survey conducted earlier this year that found voters were concerned enough about homelessness issues to possibly reach such a threshold in November. Chavez said it indicates that "for the first time in recent memory, voters see housing as the most important problem facing Santa Clara County. The need for housing, the voters' concern and an upcoming high turnout election have converged -- this is the housing moment."

According to the text of the measure, the bonds will be used to acquire or improve property "to provide affordable local housing for vulnerable populations including veterans, seniors, the disabled, low-income individuals or families, foster youth, victims of abuse, the homeless and individuals suffering from mental health and substance abuse illnesses."

The majority of the funds -- \$750 million -- would go toward those considered to be in the "extremely low income" category, often meaning homeless or on the verge of being homeless.

Tuesday's meeting was attended by many residents from that population who had emotional stories to tell the board.

Christy Burton, who lived on the streets of Silicon Valley for five years before getting a spot in a Japantown apartment last December, said the measure is "the most righteous and true" item that county leaders and voters could have before them.

"I was under the bridge, I was out in the park, I was all over the place," she said. "You can't imagine what it's like; it's horrific. You wonder where you're going to find your food because SSI hasn't come in. All you want to do is die, and it's like you're already dead, just dead and walking around."

The bond measure has also garnered support outside of county government, notably from San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo as well as those involved in nonprofits serving the homeless.

"Being willing to champion a measure that will directly benefit thousands of our most vulnerable residents is the single most important thing we can do to address our homelessness crisis," said Jennifer Loving, executive director of Destination: Home, a nonprofit that works to improve how public and private organizations work together to solve the housing crisis. "We know how to end homelessness but we cannot do it without homes. This measure will provide the solution our community needs to end homelessness and increase the supply of affordable housing for those who truly need it the most."

The bond language includes a requirement for an annual audit performed by an independent firm and review by an oversight committee.

Last year, a census of the homeless population counted 6,556 in Santa Clara County, with 4,627 considered unsheltered -- living on the streets, encampments or in vehicles.

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