

Sacramento city and county take first steps toward giving housing to homeless

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Sacramento City Council members and Sacramento County supervisors late Tuesday night moved forward on a plan to give homeless people priority for federal housing subsidies in coming years.

Just before midnight at a joint meeting that drew an overflow crowd of about 400, the City Council unanimously passed a resolution to begin a lengthy process to provide 200 public housing spots for homeless people. The Council also asked the county to do the same with up to 1,600 federal housing subsidy vouchers under its control over a two-year period.

The Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution directing staff to report back by March on what impacts prioritizing vouchers for homeless people would have. One concern of housing advocates is that the move could hurt thousands of people below the poverty line who have waited years to get public housing vouchers.

Update 10:37 p.m.

Councilwoman Angelique Ashby expressed doubts about Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg's plan. She hadn't made up her mind on her vote yet because, she said: "It's not new. Its a choice of who." Ashby said she felt strongly that a preference for children needed to be included on the list. "How do you get to a point where the children aren't first?" she asked. She said she didn't want moms with kids to get pushed down on the housing waiting lists because they weren't homeless.

Update 10:26 p.m.

Supervisor Susan Peters said she's in favor of the county's resolution, but she sees it as a partial answer to the problem. She said there are a number of obstacles with building new permanent supportive housing and suggested repurposing old motels as permanent housing. Rundown motels from the 1950s and the 1960s "remain a blight on our neighborhoods," she said. If they aren't abandoned, they facilitate prostitution and drug dealing, she said. It would be a "twofer," she said, getting rid of the blighted motels and getting homeless people off the street.

Update 10:15 p.m.

"I've got to tell you, this is the same conversation we've had for the past two years," said Councilman Jeff Harris when his mic was turned on. He said the difference was that Steinberg was willing to "rock the boat."

The issue of permanent housing and services was his theme as well: Triage is no good without places and services on the other side to get people on their feet. "So how do we pay for all this, how do we get the machine running?" he asked. He said the vouchers were only one piece of the solution.

Then he came to the point: His favored Micropad housing unit. A demo of that portable, stacking housing unit is currently on display on 9th Street outside City Hall until Feb. 1. Harris wants the modernistic units, each with their own bathroom and kitchen, to be considered for

modular communities. They could be rented by local governments rather than purchased to keep down costs, he said.

“We need to create a decent lifestyle for people so they can rehabilitate themselves,” he said. “But we have to have a force of will to make things happen.”

Update 10:08 p.m.

Councilman Jay Schenirier said he favored the voucher idea and wanted to see it could move forward with more speed.

“We’re not moving fast enough...If we can hit the ground at 80 percent and learn along the way, it’s probably better than waiting for the perfect solution.” He said the voucher plan would “take a lot of work” and require that “we have to make hard choices ... We need to get people off the street.”

Update 9:48 p.m.

During official debate, Councilman Steve Hansen criticized the rent-burden preference on the current wait lists for housing vouchers. The lists give a priority to people who pay a substantial portion of their income to rent and utilities. But homeless people pay no rent so can’t meet that criteria. “That is shocking and appalling, and I think that it was probably not malintended but its effect was bad,” Hansen said.

Update 9:37 p.m.

Supervisor Phil Serna spoke after Kennedy. He took issue with media outlets, including The Sacramento Bee, describing the proposed county resolution as “vague” compared to the city’s proposal.

The city resolution put specific numbers to its plan, calling for 200 public housing units to be put under city control for homeless housing and asking the county to do the same for 1,600 federal vouchers over two years.

The county resolution asked staff to report back on the idea with options. Serna said that the county ordinance was “very carefully crafted” to ensure that the county had time to do proper outreach and vet the idea. He said he wanted the voucher idea to be explored “aggressively and urgently” with updates given to him at least weekly if not more often.

Update 9:27 p.m.

After discussion moved from public comment to the elected officials, Supervisor Patrick Kennedy asked a series of questions about the function of the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency – including whether the agency is the best vehicle to administer housing options and other federal funds in Sacramento County.

He stressed that he wasn’t expressing an opinion but exploring all the options the city and the county have when dealing with affordable housing, one of which is dissolving SHRA and bringing its operations in house. He did call out SHRA for not responding to several requests for information, including a breakdown of operating costs, including a list of employees.

Update 9:25 p.m.

A few minutes past 9 p.m. with more than 70 speakers heard, Nottoli and Steinberg stopped public comment. The audience again erupted in protest.

Steinberg said that public comment could resume after the elected officials had their say. "I'm happy personally to stay here until 2 or 3 in the morning," Steinberg said.

"Let's do it," yelled someone from the audience. People called out accusations that the "deck" of speakers cards had been stacked so that the council and board members controlled who spoke.

"Not even KJ did that," said one woman in the audience.

With order momentarily lost, Steinberg, visibly irritated, called for the removal of one especially vocal audience member.

"Could you please remove the woman in the back of the chamber?" Steinberg asked security personnel. She was escorted out with a male companion, to the approving finger snaps of supporters.

Order restored, Supervisor Patrick Kennedy kicked off the debate among officials. Kennedy said that he had asked for a joint meeting a year ago, but the request was "denied by the former mayor actually," he said, referring to Kevin Johnson.

Update 8:49 p.m.

Near the end of those who would be allowed to speak, 18-year-old Carolina Queener came to the podium. She had been homeless in the past year, but managed to graduate from El Camino Fundamental High. She was staying with a friend, but that family was moving to Rocklin in two weeks. With Queener distressed and crying, the county clerk brought her tissues. The clock was ticking down, Queener said, and she had no place to go. It was "stressful." Steinberg sent a staff member to gather her information in the lobby. She didn't want to go to a shelter, Queener said. Steinberg said there were other options.

Update 8:41 p.m.

At 8:30 p.m., with 60 public speakers still to go on a list that exceeded 115, Mayor Darrell Steinberg said comment would be cut off at 9 p.m., with the chance of it resuming after elected officials had had their discussion.

It was not a popular move. Hecklers protested. The next speaker, Beth Southorn, head of social services group Life Steps, attempted to break the queue and let residents of her program speak. Steinberg and Supervisor Don Nottoli briefly lost control of the meeting as one of those residents, a woman in a wheelchair, crashed the microphone to laud the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency.

Steinberg stood up, standing behind his chair while listening to the next few speakers, one of whom suggested commandeering Sleep Train Arena for the homeless. Then Steinberg apparently needed a break, leaving the dias while the speakers continued.

Update 8 p.m.

During a joint meeting on homelessness Tuesday night attended by an overflow crowd of about 400 people, Sacramento City Council members and Sacramento County supervisors planned to vote on giving homeless people priority for federal housing subsidies in coming years.

But by about 8 p.m., dozens of members of the public who had signed up to speak were still offering their thoughts on a problem that has seemed intractable to many and that Mayor Darrell Steinberg has made a priority during his first two months in office.

The housing subsidy plan was championed by Steinberg, who laid out an ambitious goal to house 1,600 homeless people over two years by giving them federal vouchers and slots in public housing as vacancies become available through attrition.

Speaking to the packed room, Steinberg said that to make the problem of homelessness “demonstrably better,” the aggressive action of his proposal was needed.

“Our common foe is not a lack of heart or of goodwill,” Steinberg said during his opening remarks. “Instead our foe is inertia and the ... pervasive beliefs that the problem of homelessness is just too hard to make a real breakthrough. I disagree.”

The Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency has about 910 spots that open up each year when people move out of public housing or no longer need federal subsidies for open-market rentals.

About 70,000 people are on 11 waitlists for the vouchers and units, many waiting years to make it to the top of the lists. At a meeting with The Sacramento Bee editorial board Monday, Steinberg said that the lists were problematic because many applicants can't be found when a unit becomes available.

He also said that people on the lists are asked to show they are “rent-burdened” before they can qualify for housing. Since homeless people don't pay rent, that requirement, in effect, bumps them to the bottom under the current system.

Steinberg's staff said on Tuesday that among the 10 most populous cities in California, Sacramento is the only one with the rent-burden preference.

Under Steinberg's plan, SHRA would prioritize homeless people over other groups on the wait lists. Currently, no priority is given to the homeless. Instead, priority goes to groups including veterans, the elderly, the rent-burdened and the disabled. Steinberg stressed at the meeting that his plan would not displace anyone in housing, or push anyone off the list who was in imminent danger of becoming homeless.

He said Monday that the preference for homeless people under his plan would allow enough flexibility to deal with individuals on a case-by-case basis.

The city and county proposals under discussion Tuesday differed.

The Board of Supervisors' resolution left out the specific numbers in the city's version. Instead, it asked staff to come back by March with more detailed plans and information about the proposal. It also directed SHRA to start outreach on the idea.

The plans were not without detractors. During the lengthy public comments, many worried how those on the housing waiting lists would be affected, how critical counseling and services would be delivered to those who obtain vouchers, and if the plan was fair to people who have already waited a long time for housing.

Others said housing vouchers might not solve the problem because rental vacancies are so limited in the Sacramento area.

Jim Lofgren, head of the Rental Housing Association of Sacramento Valley, said his organization would “do what we can to help out,” but voucher recipients still would need to find a local landlord willing to rent to them.

Often, that means a landlord willing to accept a chronically homeless tenant without a traditional credit history and with the stigma of potential addiction issues and other problems.

Lofgren said the local housing market was extremely tight. Some neighborhoods have up to 97 percent occupancy rates.

“We're pretty maxed out,” Lofgren said, adding that he supported the plan.

“We need you,” Steinberg told him.

Before the supervisors and council members looked at long-term solutions, staff members offered their latest update on three recently opened local shelters: The facilities have been open 26 times over the past 37 nights and have had more than 800 stays, including some repeat visitors. They've served 370 men and women, seven children and teens, and two people older than 80.

Supervisor Phil Serna said the county is readying to open a women's shelter at Serna Village in McClellan Park that will serve 25. Steinberg said other shelters were in the works.

"While tonight we talk about the long term ... we cannot ignore the crisis that exists every single day on our streets and on our riverbanks," the mayor said.

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