

Sebastopol takes first step toward overnight parking program for homeless people in RVs



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Sebastopol has set in motion plans to launch a safe parking program for people living out of their RV's to be located near the city's community center.

On Wednesday, the City Council unanimously approved a preliminary agreement with Sonoma Applied Village Services, a nonprofit supporting homeless people, to run the pilot program on a city-owned lot at 425 Morris St. for one year. The agreement comes largely in response to a growing encampment with over a dozen RVs on Morris Street.

"This would not be a permanent solution, but it would be solving a problem that we're having right now," Mayor Una Glass said at the meeting.

Under the nonprofit's current proposal, the program could accommodate up to 20 RVs and around 35 people, be open 24/7, offer some mental health and social services, and have on-site security for the first 30 to 60 days before program staff take over security responsibilities.

City staff say the hope is to move as many people as possible living on Morris Street into the lot, which could open as early as January, before eventually clearing the unsanctioned RV camp.

A 2018 federal court ruling effectively prevents officials from clearing most encampments throughout the West Coast without first offering shelter.

The one-year program, which could be extended, is estimated to cost between \$369,420 and \$439,420, depending on how many services would ultimately be offered.

Sonoma Applied Village Services has already received a federal pandemic stimulus grant of \$368,000 to cover most of the expense. That funding is contingent on getting city approval for the program by Dec. 3, meaning officials are moving fast to possibly make the program a reality.

“We can’t afford to wait five years for someone to build a house for somebody,” said Adrienne Lauby, the nonprofit’s president. “This is a cheaper solution, and for now, that’s the money we have in our county.”

About a quarter of the approximately 2,700 homeless people in Sonoma County live in their vehicles, according to the county’s 2020 homeless census, which was conducted before the pandemic. A total of 129 homeless people live in Sebastopol. (The count does not break out vehicle-dwellers by city.)

Ahead of a final vote by the council, which could come as soon as next month, Sebastopol has begun reaching out to community members and local groups in the Morris Street area. They include the Sebastopol Cultural Community Center, Greenacre Homes and School and nearby business.

Already, some local residents have expressed safety concerns about the program.

“Clearly, this Council has very little concern for working people and working families who need safe access to public space, well-maintained sidewalks, access to bike lanes, a functioning fire department and well developed parks,” Sebastopol resident Kate Huag wrote in an email to the city.

The conversion of the 31-room Sebastopol Inn into homeless housing last year elicited similar [pushback](#), along with accusations county and city governments didn’t fully take into account public opposition to the project.

At Wednesday’s meeting, City Council officials promised to make every effort to hear community concerns.

“There will be plenty of opportunity over the next month for more vetting and more public input,” Glass said. “This is about the city saying we want to move forward with vetting this idea and determining whether it’s the right fit for us.”

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