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Legal campsites proposed for homeless

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Published Friday, Jan. 23, 2009

Sacramento homeless who illicitly camp along the American River Parkway and on city sidewalks may soon be able to live in tent communities sanctioned by government and police.

Police, city and county leaders and homeless advocates are seriously considering several potential locations for communities that would allow campers to live free from police interference and offer basic services such as running water and portable toilets.

Mayor Kevin Johnson told The Bee he is open to the concept.

"I am actually optimistic that we're going to get something done," said Mark Merin, who has filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court against the city and county on behalf of homeless people who by choice or circumstances live outdoors rather than in shelters. Merin argues that ticketing homeless people for illegal camping violates their constitutional rights.

The idea of sanctioned homeless camps, which would have to be approved by the City Council and Sacramento County Board of Supervisors, undoubtedly will face opposition from property owners in affected areas.

North Sacramento developer Robert Slobe, for one, said tent communities would "burden the poorest neighborhoods in the region," including his own, with more problems.

"Homelessness will not go away any time soon, but we can no longer burden our working poor and their open spaces with the full weight of the problem," Slobe said. "It is a burden to be shared by all."

Some 2,500 homeless people live in Sacramento, and several hundred of them are camping outside at any given time, surveys suggest.

For years, area cops and park rangers have engaged in a kind of chess game with them. Tent communities pop up on sidewalks, on the American River Parkway and in front of shelters, and nearby residents and business owners complain. Police roust everyone under the threat of citations and seizure of possessions, and the homeless pull up stakes and go elsewhere, only to return weeks or months later.

Dana Matthes, the Sacramento police captain whose officers are charged with enforcing laws against illegal camping, acknowledged that things need to change.

"What we are doing now is not working," said Matthes. "So let's take a hard look at other options. Let's look at the pros and cons of various approaches. Let's see what other cities are doing. It's safe to say that this is going to require a lot of legwork and a lot of input from many different people."

Advocates of establishing one or more legal campgrounds for the homeless may have an ally in new Mayor Johnson. He has spoken favorably of a tent city in Phoenix, where he once lived and played professional basketball.

At that encampment, Johnson noted, residents set their own rules and police themselves, and no violence, stealing or illegal drugs are allowed.

"I don't know if it's something every city should do," said Johnson, "but it's certainly something our city should be looking at."

With an eye toward resolving Merin's lawsuit, filed in 2007 on behalf of 11 homeless men and women, a group of about two dozen city and county leaders, activists and others are considering sites for camp communities.

They declined to disclose potential locations, but said all are within walking distance of the Loaves & Fishes homeless complex on North C Street, where many homeless people shower, eat their meals and get other help. Merin said one of the sites under study is a longtime homeless campsite within the American River Parkway in the shadow of the Blue Diamond almond processing plant. The group also is considering the idea of an indoor tent city, possibly in an empty warehouse.

"We're pretty early in the process and we're looking at a lot of different things," said Chance Trimm, a deputy city attorney. "We're all sharing our thoughts and concerns."

Beyond the effects on surrounding areas, Trimm and others said, officials are considering potential costs of establishing the homeless communities and how the sites would be governed and policed.

The potential sites, which could accommodate 50 or more tents, were picked with the help of Sacramento officers who patrol areas used by campers, Merin said. They were chosen based on their proximity to agencies that offer services, access to bus and light-rail routes, and potential impact on residential neighborhoods.

Homeless campsites have been plagued by massive trash problems, fires, violence, and drug and alcohol abuse. Concentrating them in already impoverished areas including North Sacramento and Dos Rios is elitist and unfair, Slobe said.

"I would be violently opposed to any camp that is not located in a wealthier neighborhood," such as Land Park or McKinley Park, Slobe said.

"Hiding the problem in the parkway is not part of any solution," said Slobe. "In the place we are calling a national treasure, homeless people are cutting down trees, defecating next to trails, bathing in the river, bringing in vicious dogs, pornography and drugs."

An emotional clash between residents like Slobe and homeless advocates likely will become public in the coming weeks, when the City Council takes up the issue as a step toward resolving Merin's lawsuit.

The suit calls for, among other things, the establishment of outdoor "high tolerance campgrounds" where homeless people could live free of police interference and would have access to basic

services including lockers, portable toilets, heat and running water. Such tent cities have been established with various degrees of success in other communities, including Portland, Ore., and Seattle.

"It's certainly not unprecedented nationally, but it would be a first for Sacramento," said Bob Erlenbusch, a consultant on homelessness and affordable housing who has been involved in the local discussions.

"It just makes sense," said Erlenbusch, president of the board of directors of the National Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness. "Right now, people have to guard their possessions. They have no place for trash. It's a public health nightmare. What is needed are structured campgrounds, with certain ground rules, where people can be safe and begin to address their larger needs. It's the first step to ending chronic homelessness."

One member of Sacramento's chronically homeless population, Precious Wilson, said she likes the idea.

"I think it would be great if Sacramento would open up some land so that we didn't have to be harassed all the time," said Wilson, who estimated she has lived on the streets off and on for half of her 24 years. "I'm pretty sure people would be willing to behave and pick up after themselves if we had that sort of thing here."

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