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EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER



Council prompted by cold snap to open emergency shelter, and tackles FEMA housing and pot during marathon meeting

It was acknowledged across the

City Council dais as a seemingly impossible directive for Chico City Manager Mark Orme: Open a temporary winter shelter in less than 24

Orme pleaded for more direction Tuesday (Feb. 5), but the panel had only suggestions on potential locations: vacated fire stations, perhaps? Tent-enclosed parking lots? The airport? City Hall? Each has its own roadblocks, and none are designed for human habitation.

But the mandate was as stark as the snow that fell on Chico earlier that day: This has to happen now, before more people die in the cold of winter. It is intended as a temporary measure, only for belowfreezing nights.

"I'm tired of looking for everybody else to take action on this," Mayor Randall Stone said. "People are coming here expecting us to provide safety for them. It's literally freezing cold outside. People die in this weather, and we're going to wait for the county to take action?"

The agenda item followed discussion about the Federal Emergency Management Agency's plans to establish temporary housing for Camp Fire survivors—a thus-far unsuccessful effort in city limitsand vet another controversial topic, cannabis. The meeting concluded after 1 a.m.

Regarding a cold-weather emergency facility, the panel mostly

spoke of the urgency to act, given recent freezing temperatures, and a vote in favor of the directive ultimately fell along party lines. Councilman Sean Morgan said the responsibility rests with the county and community nonprofits, not the city, which runs the risk of forever being in charge of emergency sheltering if it starts doing so now, despite it not being "in our wheelhouse."

Butte County is tasked with opening emergency cooling and warming centers during extreme weather, with its main consideration being a prediction of three consecutive days of extreme temperatures.

Councilwoman Ann Schwab said she initially had the same concerns, considering the city had stepped in to fund the library, a county service, for a long time. However, this is a humanitarian crisis, she continued, and the council needs to act in the short-term as Orme works with nonprofits and other community organizations to formulate a long-term plan.

Most of the speakers, 11 total, were in favor of the emergency measure.

Among the naysayers was Jamie Jin, who said she was in support of shelters, but did not want evacuees and families from Paradise being taken in at the same location as criminals or those who are addicted to drugs.

Jin provided the council with

a petition purportedly with about 2,000 signatures of citizens who do not want a low-barrier shelter downtown or in neighborhoods or near churches. This petition was created in response to Safe Space Winter Shelter's collaboration with the Jesus Center and Torres Community Shelter to establish a permanent, year-round low-barrier shelter, funded by a \$1 million Walmart grant.

For Dee Dee La Perle, herself a Camp Fire survivor, there was no pushback against mixing such populations. La Perle told the council she slept on the street last night, and the most pressing issue is getting everyone out of the elements.

"You all are warm and people are freezing, and if they die, the blood is all on your hands," she chided. "Get real and do something. I'm tired of empty promises."

Perhaps the most significant barrier: the operation. Safe Space board President Angela McLaughlin told the panel the nonprofit is struggling to find volunteers for its own lowbarrier shelter, which is full, and probably wouldn't be able to help.

Wednesday morning, Stone told the CN&R Orme is "working on two paths" and that, though the council authorized Orme to come up with a plan up to \$100,000, the city is intending to secure private financing.

Putting the emergency shelter discussion into context, there still are