



Nerissa Prieto will bring in up to four RVs at her property on Royce Lane to house people displaced by the Camp Fire. An appeal filed by her neighbors was denied by the City Council.

PHOTO BY ASHIAH SCHARAGA

Naysayers' concerns nixed

Temporary RV, shelter projects moving forward

After the Camp Fire, Suzanne Hart took in her brother and mother. But more upheaval was to come for the family: Three weeks later, Hart received an eviction notice for her Chico rental.

Hart, a registered nurse, purchased an RV for her family and moved into Meriam Park's temporary community. Their time there is almost up, too. Though Hart said she loves working at Enloe Medical Center, she prepared to move by acquiring her nursing license in two other states.

Then, another opportunity to stay local surfaced: A colleague, Dr. Nerissa Prieto, shared her plan to take in up to four RVs at her property on Royce Lane. She would do so by way of the city of Chico's emergency disaster recovery housing ordinance, which allows for temporary housing to be set up on vacant or developed property in certain zoning districts.

Those plans could have been dashed at the latest special City Council meeting Tuesday (April 9). Prieto's permit was appealed by her neighbors, who argued that the project would generate too much noise and harm the private roadway and its black walnut trees. The appeal was among two items on the agenda related to the Camp Fire that drew a fair amount of criticism from the public. Discussion of the proposed Orange Street Shelter (see "Unbelievable opportunity," page 8), a Jesus Center and Safe Space Winter Shelter collaboration, proved to be most contentious, drawing nearly 60 speakers.

In response to her neighbors' resistance, Prieto said she intends to offer a stable, quiet,

safe space to small business owners and health care professionals, where they can stay until it's time to rebuild or save enough money for a new home.

"It behooves us at this point to cling desperately onto all of those [workforce] resources and accommodate them to the greatest degree possible," she said, addressing the council.

Hart also spoke before the dais: "When Dr. Prieto heard of my situation ... she said, 'I can't believe this. I have to do something,'" she said. "I would potentially be somebody that would be [living] there."

For Prieto's project, at 650/660 Royce Lane, several neighbors argued for a shorter length of the permit—one year, instead of three to five. Roxanne Garcia was one such neighbor. She argued that the property has limited space—Prieto lives there and has a pool and an accessory dwelling unit, she noted.

"A three- to five-year timeline is not very temporary," Garcia said. "Who will ensure that those tenants are really Camp Fire victims and not revenue generators? Who will be there to ensure the safety and integrity of our neighborhood and street stays intact?"

Councilman Sean Morgan, who stated that he grew up on the street, argued that the project didn't fit the neighborhood and "puts the burden of what happens to that road squarely on the residents, who are saying, 'We don't want this here.'"

City staff said that road maintenance would need to be worked out by the residents, since

it is a private street, and that repairs already are needed. The city's urban forester has volunteered to be present for any utility trenching to ensure the walnut trees are not harmed.

Ultimately, the appeal was denied along party lines (Councilmembers Kasey Reynolds and Morgan voted in favor).

The ordinance governing disaster recovery permits, such as Prieto's, also was extended—from six months to five years. It will expire April 16, 2024. So far, nine permits have been approved since the emergency ordinance went into effect on Dec. 4.

The most polarizing item of the night was the Orange Street Shelter, with nearly 60 speakers addressing the panel (75 cards originally were turned in). Discussion was agendized as informational only, so no council action was taken. The 24/7 low-barrier shelter is proposed in a temporary capacity at 388 Orange St. It is funded by the \$1 million Walmart Foundation donation made after the Camp Fire and a \$450,000 Homeless Emergency Aid Program grant awarded by the Butte Countywide Homeless Continuum of Care.

Most spoke in favor of the shelter and the city's dire need to provide a safe space for homeless people. Issues that have been shared with the panel over the years—such as public defecation, loitering and abandoned property in streets and waterways—could be addressed by this shelter, many argued.

Several Safe Space volunteers shared the positive interactions they have had with homeless folks through the organization. "The people I saw on a daily basis ... are not the problem," Josh Lang told the council. "These people just need help, they need housing, they need a way to get back on their feet."

Those in opposition mostly cited safety concerns or argued that it was the wrong location. "I do support low-barrier shelters, but they need ... accountability and actual security," Casey Croninger said. Similarly, Morgan called it a "no accountability shelter" with no strategic design.

Jamie Jin said the shelter would be much too close to her daughter's school, Notre Dame Catholic School, and would put the health and safety of children at risk. In contrast, Chico Unified School District teacher Eva Horvath spoke in support of the shelter because it could provide more stability for the homeless children in her classroom.

Councilman Scott Huber summed up the viewpoints of his liberal colleagues: "What a great example this is of a win-win: The unhoused win by gaining a secure place to lay their heads, and townsfolk win, as those camping in parks and doorways have a better place to go."

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