



Takes on homelessness

Panel, public get passionate about problem in Chico

With the prospect of a shelter in the south campus neighborhood polarizing the community, Rob Davidson knew hosting two hours of civil discourse about homelessness in Chico would be a tall order.

Nonetheless, he and Susanna Boxall—faculty members at Chico State—moved ahead. They assembled a panel of five, each distinctly invested in the issue, and welcomed the public to engage them. Around 150 people attended last Thursday evening (May 9) at Chico State.

“We knew it was going to get passionate, and it did,” Davidson told the CN&R afterward, as several dozen participants mingled. “It was important to have different viewpoints.”

Differences emerged early and often. About the only point of consensus: The status quo isn’t working. As for why, and solutions, answers varied widely. Some in the audience didn’t stifle objections when they found a comment objectionable—others left early.

The panel consisted of Angela McLaughlin, president of the Safe Space Winter Shelter, which is working to open the 24/7, low-barrier Orange Street Shelter; Rob Berry, leader of the citizens group Chico First; Robert Jones, a Chico State philosophy professor who advocates for human and animal rights; Trevor Guthrie, an Associated Students officer at Chico State, elected president for next year; and Patrick Newman, founder of Chico Friends on the Street.

The event was part of Slow Theatre’s Chico Speaks Discussion Series held quarterly. Organizers Davidson and Boxall sought varied opinions. However, Berry wound up the only opponent to the Orange Street Shelter. Boxall said they’d invited others, including Chico State President Gayle Hutchinson, and expected Guthrie to share common ground with Berry

“because we heard that the Associated Students had concerns about the shelter ... we were surprised to find out that he was a supporter.”

Berry—known for provocative statements at City Council meetings—drew the strongest reactions from a crowd composed of about half students and a quarter who seemed predisposed to his position.

In posing a solution he calls “contact, enforcement, accountability,” he said homeless people should provide something of value, even as nominal as their “real name,” for any service or assistance. When an audience member asked panelists whether a shelter facility would empower those with housing insecurity, Berry replied it would benefit a fraction—“the easiest to help”—but not those who behave violently or criminally or have untreated addiction or illness.

Then he dropped a room-rocker: “Nobody has the right to live in Chico anonymously.”

As right-to-privacy retorts rippled, Berry explained that there are reasons to know who people are. For instance, the point of making contact with homeless people is to “treat an individual as an individual”—that’s how to do what McLaughlin said Safe Space does, “meet people where they are.” Besides, Berry continued, we all leave traces: Anyone who has a bank account isn’t living anonymously.

Immediately, he restoked emotions: “You don’t get to drop in from L.A., rape a few people and go back to L.A., whether you are homeless or not homeless.”

Berry confirmed to the CN&R that he referenced Ishmael Smith, a Los Angeleno suspected of raping a woman March 9 in south Chico. Smith, who police records say was a “transient” while in Chico, was arrested April 25 in L.A. and faces trial on a rape charge in Butte County.

As moderator Rob Davidson (left) tries to calm audience members, panelist Rob Berry (foreground) engages a questioner late in the forum on homelessness last Thursday (May 9) at Chico State.

PHOTO BY EVAN TUCHINSKY

Jones, who in prepared remarks dissected an editorial by Berry opposing the Orange Street Shelter, took offense at the comment.

“Rob, that is demonizing a population—that is fear-mongering.”

McLaughlin opened the proceedings by laying out Safe Space’s vision for the low-barrier shelter. (See “And then there was one,” Newsline, May 2.) She acknowledged concerns raised about the location but said it’s “as far out from downtown as we can get it ... if you want to draw people from downtown, you need to be close enough that people will access the shelter.”

It would provide 100 to 120 people a place to stay, food and social services. For context, Chico’s homeless population tops 1,000, with more than 400 living outside nightly, Berry deemed that solution insufficient and questioned whether \$1 million granted from Walmart to fund sheltering might be used better.

Guthrie—who, alongside peers across the Cal State system, has lobbied legislators on behalf of low-income students—responded: “If it only helps 100 people, is it worth it? Yes, it literally is worth it if it helps 100 people.”

In making his case for low-barrier housing with services (i.e., the Orange Street Shelter), Jones discussed the dangers of living on the streets. He cited a study of five cities that found 49 percent of homeless people become victims of a violent attack and 62 percent witness a violent attack.

With nearly 130,000 homeless Californians, according to 2018 figures, “this is a big problem”—and to address it, “we’re already paying from tax dollars,” he said, around \$30,000 a year per person. “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over, getting no results and thinking, *That’s the solution.*”

Newman, another shelter advocate, posited that Chico has “about a six-year history of intense activity [responding to homelessness], precipitated by exponentially growing numbers of chronically homeless—and more and more confusion and consternation in our citizenry.”

After describing that history, including City Council decisions such as enacting the sit/lie ordinance that expanded police actions for loitering, Newman said: “It’s time we have a real conversation about our values and about fundamental human rights. ... The homeless are hard to organize; they have a very small voice. They need our voice.”

One spoke up. Organizers didn’t include a homeless person on the panel, but Richard Muenzer rose to question the panelists.

After asking Berry whether his plan addresses mental health (answer: yes), Muenzer responded to his anonymity remark: “Every American that is housed and unhoused has the right to privacy and [to] pursue their happiness wherever he wants to go.”

—EVAN TUCHINSKY
evantuchinsky@newsreview.com

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