

City workers dismantle camps during evictions at the Windchime Park encampments on April 1.  
PHOTO BY CHRIS NELSON

and Ritter, the group includes Councilmembers Sean Morgan and Kasey Reynolds, Supervisor Tod Kimmelshue, Chico City Manager Mark Orme, other city staff, county personnel from the departments of Behavioral Health and Employment and Social Services (DESS), and representatives for Assemblyman James Gallagher and Congressman Doug LaMalfa. The meetings have been held in person every month since January and at a different location each time (one each at DESS buildings in Chico and Oroville, and one at a Chico city building).

“At the last [city/county] meeting together, the City Council attendees (Morgan was not present and the discussion was led by the mayor) determined that additional emergency shelter beds may not be necessary to add to the continuum as there is consideration that there will be enough beds for the homeless who want to stay in a shelter bed once the ‘new’ beds currently under development are made available by service providers,” Kochems told the CN&R March 30. “This thought process is considering that there are quite a few of the Chico homeless that prefer to live outdoors in a nomadic type of environment.”

Kochems said the group approved a plan to conduct needs assessment surveys at the meeting.

The new beds Kochems referred to are various projects included in a report on upcoming shelter beds she presented to the council on March 16. However, many of those 390

potential beds will not be available for months or even years, and some—like 100 beds that could possibly manifest by February 2023 as a result of affordable housing efforts—are hypothetical. Only 50 beds—from a Torres Community Shelter expansion—will provide additional emergency shelter on a nightly basis.

Regarding sanctioned camping, Kochems said her statement in the email to an advocate was based on the council’s lack of receptiveness to solutions.

“The City Council has been provided many safe parking and outdoor sheltering proposals/solutions by individuals and service provider organizations since my tenure with the city,” she said. “These solutions have come through city email in which City Council members and city staff have been copied. At any time, council members could move a solution to a City Council agenda for further discussion, and that has only happened once and council did not approve it [a ‘safe parking’ initiative proposed by the North State Shelter Team that would allow overnight vehicle stays at the Caltrans park and ride on Highway 32, rejected Feb. 2]. As well, city staff have presented options for council to consider and that has not made any forward momentum in the past eight months. One might say that council members are not interested in implementing an outdoor shelter environment.”

## Debatable direction

Coolidge said the discussions had at the March city/county collaborative meeting have not impacted city policy toward efforts to address homelessness or Kochem’s direction as homeless solutions coordinator.

“A variety of items were discussed at that meeting but there was no direction, per se, in terms of what needs to be done or what doesn’t,” he said during a phone interview April 1. “Even if there was, that’s not council direction, which would require a vote and discussion and public input. We do have some items coming up [at City Council meetings] that might outline those items more.”

Supervisor Tami Ritter says Butte County definitely lacks adequate shelter options, particularly for people with substance abuse issues.  
CN&R FILE PHOTO



Chico Mayor Andrew Coolidge reportedly led the discussion at a closed-door March 12 meeting of city and county officials and staff.  
CN&R FILE PHOTO BY EVAN TUCHINSKY

Asked if he believes a substantial portion of the homeless population prefer a nomadic, unsheltered lifestyle, he said he is unsure, which is why the survey is needed.

“I think the idea behind that survey is to establish whether or not, if we have beds available, people want to actually take them, and if they want to actually go get help somewhere versus if they just want a camping environment to live life as they please,” he said. “There’s a strong urge to find out what exactly the folks in those particular homeless communities want and need rather than just providing more beds or services that they’re not going to take advantage of.”

Regarding sufficient shelter, Coolidge provided a spreadsheet showing that in 2019, Butte County ranked 10th out of 44 Continuum of Cares in the state according to available beds versus overall population as evidence that Butte County has an abundance of shelter space. The data he provided didn’t include the total or per capita numbers of unhoused individuals.

Ritter said she “couldn’t disagree more” with the ideas that Butte County has enough shelter options or that a significant portion of homeless people prefer a roaming, outdoor lifestyle.

“We absolutely need more emergency shelter beds,” she said during a phone call April 1. “Where this group landed is that the county has hired a nonprofit organization to do outreach and find individuals who are camping to find out if those



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