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Basic supply and demand

On the site of a stalled affordable housing project, a large homeless camp grew

BY RAHEEM F. HOSSEINI / raheemh@newsreview.com



Tents and personal belongings clutter a Stockton Boulevard property where more than 100 homeless people used to reside.

Eric Guerra climbed stairs as he recounted the uphill marathon to turn a long-vacant tract of government-owned land into homes that regular people can afford.

Catching his breath, Sacramento's vice mayor recalled that the effort stalled out well before his election to the City Council in 2015 due to a familiar foe: Too many municipal cooks, not enough dollar ingredients.

When the massive global recession staggered California's economy a decade ago, one of the casualties was a state fund for local redevelopment projects. That blanked a Sacramento plan to replace an eyesore swath of dirt with affordable housing. Guerra, who worked in the state Legislature at the time, said stakeholders continued to hold planning sessions about the site, but were unable to advance the ball. That's how it stayed until 2018, when Guerra ran into state Senator Richard Pan at church.

Their casual conversation resulted in Senate Bill 481, a micro-targeted piece of legislation signed into law last year. SB 481 authorizes Sacramento County's redevelopment successor agency to sell the property on Stockton Boulevard for less than fair market value as long as affordable housing is built on it.

"The future use of that land will be affordable housing," Guerra promised last week.

The present and past of that land has been a stark reminder of what happens in the absence of affordable housing.

Up until recently, more than a hundred homeless people resided on the sprawling former sites of the San Juan Motel and a mobile home park, said two occupants. The Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency, which owns the property along with the county and its redevelopment successor agency, evicted most occupants and installed a fence—two days before volunteers conducted a federally required spot count of the county's homeless population. Guerra downplayed the effect of the partial sweep on the Point-in-Time count, saying that Sacramento Steps Forward navigators would know where to find homeless residents.

"I'm not worried about the undercount in that situation," he said.

Crystal Rose Sanchez believes there's reason to be concerned. A member of the Sacramento Homeless Organizing Committee and founder of her own social advocacy group, Reckless Charity, Sanchez said homeless people are already wary of participating in the count, as many fear they're just making themselves targets for the sweeps they expect to follow. And since homeless people don't see the obvious benefits of participating in a count that helps determine federal funding, they're reluctant to make their lives more difficult.

"When it comes right down to it, who's it really helping?" Sanchez said of the count. "The resources aren't really there."

That was clear at the open-air tent village on Stockton Boulevard, where occupants got mixed messages about whether they could stay and for how long.

"They can't give them a straight answer for anything," said Sanchez, who spent time at the encampment.

Guerra said the visible homelessness along Stockton Boulevard "just highlights that we need more resources for folks."

He envisions enlisting a nonprofit developer such as Mercy Housing to buy the land for a buck and using Measure U revenue to help ensure what gets built is an organic community rather than an outcropping of apartments. For instance, Guerra imagines a child-care facility to serve working parents. He says since the site is close to a bus line, as well as grocery and drug stores, it's well-suited for that level of housing.

While SB 481 sets the table, it doesn't put food on it. Financing will still be a challenge.

"Like any redevelopment project, this one will still have the same issue, which is the gap financing," Guerra explained. "We'll have to think creatively about how to get there."

In the meantime, Guerra said, he sees people on Stockton Boulevard every day who are "white-knuckling it."