

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

City officials suddenly support homeless tent cities, car camps in Sacramento neighborhoods

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As homeless men, women and children in Sacramento wait for three new large shelters to open, another model that local officials have repeatedly rejected over the years is now quickly gaining traction.

The “safe ground” model – essentially creating an area where homeless people can live safely in tent cities or in cars – has not been a part of Mayor Darrell Steinberg’s homeless plan. Steinberg has instead been pushing hard for large shelters with rehousing services. But as the city enters its fifth month without a city-run shelter, other alternatives are now coming to the fore.

Councilman Jeff Harris was previously opposed to the “safe ground” model, along with most of the council aside from Councilman Allen Warren. Now, Harris is proposing the city open a temporary homeless camp similar to one Modesto and Stanislaus County opened earlier this year.

“To get from today until we stand up more shelter beds, which we desperately need, I suggest we take a look at the safe ground model,” Harris said.

Harris and city staff earlier this month traveled to Modesto to check out that model. He liked what he saw.

The camp, officially called [the Modesto Outdoor Emergency Shelter](#), opened underneath a bridge in a regional park in February. It holds roughly 400 campers who sleep in about 290 white and blue 10-foot-by-10-foot tents donated by a Reno company called Qamp, said Doug Halcomb, the camp's operations manager.

Local officials provide portable bathrooms and wash stations, and nonprofits provide at least one meal a day, Halcomb said. The camp is fenced in and has two full-time security guards to ensure safety. Providers come to offer medical, mental health and rehousing services to campers. Sacramento-based organization Turning Point handles the day-to-day operations, Halcomb said.

“When I came back from Modesto, I went to the River District and there were more than 150 camps on one city block,” Harris said during a meeting earlier this month. “People were sleeping on the street, defecating in the open. I mean, it’s a mess. This is our city. And this is my district. And that’s what I saw when I came home and I thought, why don’t we do it? Why don’t we try a safe ground model and try to control some of these issues?”

Opening a “safe ground” for campers could also be cost effective; Harris estimates well under \$1 million. By comparison, the two 100-bed shelters the council approved Tuesday will cost [more than \\$20 million to open and operate for two years](#).

Harris suggested the tent city open next month and close in the spring, after a shelter under the W/X freeway opens. He has a few location ideas in his district – which includes the American River, East Sacramento, South Natomas and part of north Sacramento – but is not sure if they will work.

“It’s not a solution. It’s a way to get from here to there and mitigate the deep impacts on the street in the short term and create safety and hygiene,” Harris said.

Harris previously proposed a [shelter site on Cal Expo property](#), but Cal Expo has not yet approved it.

City Hall has long debated the tent city model. In 2016, a delegation of 20 Sacramento officials [toured tent facilities in Seattle](#), where a network of camps has existed for years. Some officials expressed support for the Seattle model, but the issue was soon dropped.

Councilman Rick Jennings, also struggling to find a site for a large shelter in his south Sacramento district, is pushing for the city to open “safe parking zones,” essentially a safe ground model for car camping.

Volunteers canvassing the county in January found [four times the number of vehicles](#) where people were living than they counted in 2015. Researchers estimate people were sleeping in at least 340 vehicles in the county. This included approximately 100 children. Most of the vehicles were in the city of Sacramento.

The City Council on Tuesday asked staff to come back with a plan for both models. Jennings said he hopes staff can come back with a plan, including costs and potential sites for safe parking zones, within 30 days. He wants to start with a pilot program for about six months. If it goes well, he wants to open more.

“We’re going to look at every possibility within our district, from businesses to nonprofit partners to community centers to parks,” Jennings said Wednesday. “We’re going to look and see if there’s an opportunity at every single one to put a pilot in place so we can get some results.”

Steinberg is supportive of both ideas, he told The Sacramento Bee Wednesday.

“I applaud my colleagues who are working to find creative solutions to our community’s greatest challenge,” Steinberg said in a statement. “Our goal is to get people under a roof with the help they need as quickly as possible. I support any efforts to make their plight even a little better as we aggressively help people get inside.”

Crystal Sanchez, a homeless activist who visited the Modesto site earlier this year, has been urging local officials to replicate the model here. She and other activists, including civil rights attorney Mark Merin, urged Sacramento County Board of Supervisors members to create a safe ground at the former San Juan Motel lot on Stockton Boulevard, where Sacramento Sheriff’s deputies [cleared out dozens of campers earlier this year](#). They didn’t go for it.

“Modesto is utilizing what is already in place to help their homeless population,” Sanchez said. “It is a full-scaled organized community ... It is cost effective and involves every aspect of the community. The local government and the community grassroots have been doing what they do to help.”

The Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness also supports the model as a temporary response until there is enough affordable housing.

“Safe ground means that people experiencing homelessness can camp without fear of harassment from law enforcement and can come and go without the fear that all their possessions have been taken or destroyed,” Bob Erlenbusch of SRCEH said. “Equally important is that they can get a good night’s sleep without fear of violence from predators who prey on vulnerable people.”

James “Faygo” Clark, a local well-known homeless activist, said he is in favor of a safe ground model that rotates locations periodically.

“It would allow people a place to begin to stabilize and move forward,” Clark said. “They would need private security, access to trauma-informed services, access to water, sanitation, and trash pickup to succeed. We should also work to ensure that such encampments give the unhoused a voice in their operation.”

Warren, [who proposed safe ground sites](#) on his property years ago, said he still supports the model.

“I started on this three years ago and the council wasn’t prepared at that time,” Warren said. “They seem more willing now.”

Merin and other activists [in January 2017 proposed a “safe ground” site](#) near Sacramento Army Depot off Florin Perkins Road.

Councilman Eric Guerra, who represents that area, opposed it, and so did his colleagues.

Now, Guerra, also struggling to find a site for a large shelter, appears to be supportive of a safe parking zone in his south Sacramento district.

Guerra Tuesday suggested staff contact the nonprofit Power Inn Alliance to see if any parking lots could be used in the industrial area for nighttime car camping. A representative for the Power Inn group was unavailable for comment.