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Alternate Proposal Would Bring Homeless Tent to Brown Field



There are nearly 9,200 homeless people in San Diego County. Between 2016 and 2017, downtown San Diego experienced the single largest increase in homeless individuals in the region.

By GARY WARTH

From the third-story art studio where he has painted for 20 years, George Mullen has had an unobstructed view of the growing homeless population in downtown San Diego.

"As the years went on, it's gotten dramatically worse downtown," the native San Diegan said from Studio Revolution in the historic Brokers Building. "One day I was driving downtown, and I thought, 'This is absolutely crazy. What is the city leadership doing here?'"

Mullen, who is in the investment business besides being an artist, said he reached a breaking point late last year when he passed the sprawling homeless encampment around 17th Street and Imperial Avenue.

In February, he and Brian Caster, CEO of A1 Self Storage, wrote [an opinion piece](#) for The San Diego Union-Tribune that proposed using large industrial tents to temporarily house the homeless near Brown Field in Otay Mesa. Originally proposed as Camp Hope, the idea now is called [Sunbreak Ranch](#).

The proposal gained some traction, and supporters of the idea include Jerome's Furniture Chairman Jerry Navarra, Metropolitan Airpark CEO Charles Black, the East Village Residents Group, Jacobs Center for Innovation chairmen Norm Hapke Jr. and Val Jacobs Hapke, Serving Hands International and former San Diego City Attorney Casey Gwinn.

But the proposal also has created some confusion, as a similar but significantly different idea has been suggested by San Diego Padres Managing Partner Peter Seidler and Paradigm Investment Group partner and chain restaurant operator Dan Shea.

Proponents of both have similar motivations and arguments. Permanent housing for all is needed, they agree, but that solution is years away, and there is a crisis that should be addressed today to help the 9,100 local homeless people, including 5,600 who were unsheltered in last January's point-in-time count.

The disagreement comes in where the tents should be situated and how they should be funded. Seidler and Shea argue the tents should be in different locations, helping the homeless where they already are and near services. They also believe the tents can be funded through philanthropists, and they already have commitments from supporters to fund two tents, which hold 250 people each.

Mullen, who sees funding as the responsibility of the city and county, argues that placing tents in different places will be a hard sell politically.

"In theory it makes a lot of sense," he said about the multi-site approach. "Why don't we share the load in all the districts? But what's going to happen is the council person is going to get annihilated in the next elections. I have a hard time seeing it get done."

Neither proposal has gone before the City Council or been discussed at city or county committee, but Seidler and Shea do seem to be outpacing Mullen and Caster in promoting the idea.

Mullen has been relatively quiet in publicly discussing Sunbreak Ranch since his op-ed piece and he has not met with city or county officials. Seidler said he has met with many officials, attends regular symposiums on homelessness at the University of San Diego, and presented the plan at a conference with Shea last month at USD.

Still, Mullen is confident there will be public support for Sunbreak Ranch, and said he believes people also would support a small tax increase to fund it — despite the need for a two-thirds majority needed for approval, if it goes on the ballot.

“There needs to be the will, and in the public there is a will to do something like this,” he said, adding that he is disappointed that elected officials have not come forward to endorse it.



Mullen in his downtown San Diego art studio.

Mullen envisions Sunbreak Ranch as a place that is remote enough that it won't intrude on businesses and residents, but still close to services. The city-owned property near Brown Field fits the bill. It's 13 miles from the 17th Street encampment and Father Joe's Villages.

Mullen said Sunbreak Ranch would not be a place to warehouse homeless people, but rather would provide a place where they can meet with professional service providers who can help them with long-term recovery. Having government and nonprofit agencies provide services is also part of the Seidler-Shea tent plan.

“Why wouldn't we try to really help our homeless brothers and sisters, get them out of this horrible downtown on-the-street situation or in the canyons, and get them in a

clean, safe environment to help turn their lives around?" he said. "Somewhere you can go take a deep breath and not have a drug dealer or gang member or cars speeding by like you see on 17th Street."



The open space and fresh air of Brown Field in Otay Mesa – and only 13 miles from downtown San Diego.

While Mullen said he believes Sunbreak Ranch is the best approach to get homeless people off the street in the near future, he's open to other locations and ideas.

He also isn't opposed to Seidler's and Shea's proposal, and only hopes some action is taken soon to help the thousands of people on the street.

"We have different ideas, and that's all good," he said. "Whatever works is perfect, if it works."