

Guest Commentary

The solutions are actually in our own backyard

By Don Lane

Affordable housing. Homelessness. Addiction. Mental illness. Most would agree that these four issues are right at the top of the list our community's biggest problems. And most would agree that we need more physical locations for stuff (apartments, shelters, treatment centers, etc.) to address these issues.

We need sites to create these solutions somewhere in our "backyard" but we have a very difficult time identifying acceptable sites for them. Almost every time a site is named, the people that live or work or do business near that site resist it. We have become very adept at identifying reasons not to build anything worrisome near us. (I might even suggest that this is our county's greatest collective political skill!) I want to hasten to say that many of these reasons for concern are quite legitimate. What I'm not prepared to say is that all of these reasons are so compelling that we should not proceed with the rental housing or shelter or treatment center we need to site somewhere in our community.

So how do we get out of this jam?

I'd like to suggest a few steps that could move us forward.

- We need a broad and rigorous community engagement process with lots of opportunities for all of us to wrestle with these questions. This should be led by a non-governmental en-

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tity that has support from local elected officials and a diverse set of community organizations that represent neighborhoods, businesses, social services, healthcare providers and more.

- The expressed objectives of this process would be to a) establish criteria for best sites for affordable rental housing, homeless shelter and services programs and treatment centers; b) establish standards for what a neighbor can count on in terms of mitigation of likely impacts of each particular kind of activity/use.

- It is essential that the process NOT work with maps of suggested or "likely" sites. The process should only focus on criteria and standards. The only fair way to decide these kinds of siting decisions is start with a clean slate. In the past, we have always started with someone's suggestion of the likely site or sites — thereby inviting the immediate neighbors to mobilize against based on their concern that they might have been unfairly singled out to experience a new burden.

If we can go through this process and then (when all the criteria and standards are established) select sites based only on these criteria, we will have a foundation for community support for moving forward. This will not eliminate the possibility of some neighbor opposition. However, it will offer local government and the broader community compelling rationale for moving forward (and for supporting siting decisions) even if there is some nearby opposition.

We have too many pressing needs continue to accept "yes but not here... and not here... and not here, either." I think our community has established that addressing the needs of lower-income workers and families, local individuals and families without homes and people in need of treatment will have immediate benefits to our entire community. Let's get together and hammer this out and find a way to say YES.

Former Santa Cruz Mayor Don Lane researches, writes and teaches about local community policymaking with an emphasis on homelessness and affordable housing.