



REVISED AGENDA MATERIAL

Meeting Date: April 1, 2025

Item Number: 22

Item Description: Alternative Housing Options for People Experiencing Homelessness

Submitted by: Councilmember O'Keefe

Submitting updated version of item for inclusion in agenda packet, with the word "parks" removed from the recommendation.



To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council
From: Councilmember Shoshana O'Keefe (Author), Mayor Adena Ishii,
Councilmembers Brent Blackaby and Cecilia Lunaparra (Co-Sponsors)
Subject: Alternative Housing Options for People Experiencing Homelessness

RECOMMENDATION

Refer to the City Manager a request for staff to identify a list of potential locations of City properties (such as ~~parks~~, parking lots, buildings, and other sites) and private properties (to be leased or acquired) – for the purpose of establishing alternative housing options including but not limited to indoor/outdoor camping areas, safe RV and car park zones, and/or congregate or non-congregate shelters for people experiencing homelessness based on the model used at Grayson Street.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

Following the clearing of a homeless encampment at Old City Hall in early December 2024, unhoused residents formed a new encampment at Civic Center Park. Many Berkeley High School students, teachers, and parents, City of Berkeley staff, local businesses, Farmers Market vendors and visitors, residents of the encampment and their advocates have urged the City to address concerns related to health hazards and violence in and around the Civic Center Park encampment. While the City shifted focus and resources to address the encampment, successfully rehousing and securing temporary housing for many residents, various other unsanctioned encampments around Berkeley continue to pose similar concerns.

Our City remains committed to supporting our unhoused residents with the dignity, compassion, and respect they deserve while ensuring that public spaces remain equally accessible for all. This is not a mutually exclusive goal and is achievable with the support of critical stakeholders. In 2021, in collaboration with Dorothy Day House and Bayer, the City helped open a transitional shelter where unhoused people reported feeling safe, comfortable, and respected. As expected, the Grayson Street shelter and the safe RV lot closed when the City's lease with REDCO Development LLC expired. Despite its efforts, the City could not immediately identify a viable alternative for the site, but staff took note of the positive effect this indoor camping and safe outdoor parking area had on all Berkeley residents.

Working against larger national and regional trends, the City of Berkeley has significantly reduced unsheltered homelessness by 45%. Despite that, the City continues to struggle to meet the housing and wrap-around service needs of our unhoused residents. While the City continues to pursue long-term, best-practice approaches such as expanding shelter capacity and seeking funding to build more transitional and permanent affordable housing, it's clear

these efforts are not enough. We must look toward supplemental solutions and create opportunities to more expeditiously support the unhoused community, while ensuring our public space is accessible to all.

This item requests that the City Manager identify and compile a list of City- and privately-owned properties to establish housing alternatives such as an indoor/outdoor camping area, safe RV and car parking, and/or congregate or non-congregate shelter for our unhoused residents who want to stay in Berkeley. The purpose is to provide a safe, clean space where unhoused community members can live, access resources, and ultimately transition to permanent housing. Ideally, some of these sites would have capacity to support the relocation of an entire encampment, to preserve an existing supportive community.

BACKGROUND

High cost of living and the lack of affordable housing stock in the United States has led to an increase in unsheltered homelessness and chronic homelessness since 2016. Between January 2023 and January 2024, homelessness in the United States increased by 18% – the largest jump since the Department of Housing and Urban Development began reporting in 2007. Additionally, although underreported, unhoused people are more likely to be victims of violent crime than they are to commit these crimes, often worsening cycles of trauma among the unhoused community and beyond.¹

In 2024, Alameda County saw the first decrease in homelessness in a decade. Between 2022 and 2024, Berkeley saw a 21% overall decrease in homelessness and a 45% decrease in unsheltered homelessness. These decreases at the County and City levels are likely the direct result of massive investments in affordable housing production and our homelessness response system, as made possible by Berkeley residents through their support of Measures O and P – both passed in 2018 with over 77% and 72% approval, respectively. Furthermore, Measure U1 – passed in 2016 with nearly 75% of the vote – has generated millions for affordable housing projects.

In 2017, the Berkeley City Council launched the Pathways Project to address homelessness by providing temporary shelter while working on longer-term solutions. Phase 1 established the STAIR Center, a low-barrier shelter open 24 hours a day and with services such as on-site mental health support, substance use disorder programming, and job training services. Phase 2 introduced the 1,000 Person Plan to ensure shelter or housing for every homeless person in the City.

According to the 1,000 Person Plan Referral Response, to end homelessness for 1,000 people in Berkeley, the City will need up-front investments in targeted homelessness prevention, light-touch housing problem-solving, rapid rehousing, and permanent subsidies, with a cost of \$16-19.5 million upfront and an annual ongoing expense of between roughly \$12-15 million. Staff

¹ Berg, Steve. “The Disturbing Realities of Homelessness and Violence.” National Alliance to End Homelessness, January 24, 2022. <https://endhomelessness.org/blog/the-disturbing-realities-of-homelessness-and-violence/>.

concluded that even this level of investment would unlikely end homelessness, but could increase the system’s capacity to support those experiencing long-term and chronic homelessness.²

At the start of 2023, Berkeley had nearly 350 shelter beds, 108 of which were seasonal and open only during the winter months. Over the course of 2023, more than 900 individual people used a shelter bed in Berkeley. As of late 2024 and since the inception of Measures O, P, and U1, more than 650 interim housing beds and permanent housing units have been funded, serving over 2,000 residents. The City also had about 50 transitional housing beds dedicated for specific populations, including transition-aged youth, people with substance use disorders, and veterans. During January and February of 2024, 82% of available shelter beds were occupied each night on average. Non-congregate shelters had higher levels of utilization: 93% of beds in non-congregate shelters were full on average, compared to 79% of beds in congregate shelters.³

In the last several years, Berkeley has passed major zoning reforms, implemented Measure O, and is racing to meet its commitments under the Housing Element, building housing at the fastest rates in decades. Still, on any given night in Alameda County, more than 8,000 people experience homelessness, with 844 of those people residing in Berkeley. 39% of unhoused residents in Berkeley reported that the primary cause of homelessness was related to losing housing, while 33% reported their condition was related to the loss of a job and income, and 21% reported it was due to health-related issues.⁴

Despite unprecedented investments in housing, affordable housing stock remains limited, and building costs and timelines remain uncircumventable. Given the urgency around addressing newer and existing encampments around the City, Berkeley and its residents could benefit from exploring additional short-term options for alternative housing such as tiny houses, micro units, ADUs, vehicle camping, indoor or outdoor camping sites, and more – with the ultimate long-term goal of providing permanent housing.

Fortunately, there is precedent for establishing a comprehensive camping area and transitional programs in Berkeley. In 2021, the City partnered with Dorothy Day House to create the Horizon Transitional Village and Safe Parking and Respite Kickstart (SPARK) site at 742 Grayson Street in West Berkeley. The site operated from July of 2021 until the City’s lease ended on October

² City of Berkeley. Referral Response: 1000 Person Plan to Address Homelessness, April 30, 2019. [https://berkeleyca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2023-02-14 Item 14 Referral Response Home Share.pdf](https://berkeleyca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2023-02-14%20Item%2014%20Referral%20Response%20Home%20Share.pdf).

³ City of Berkeley. Gap Analysis of Berkeley’s Homelessness System of Care, July 9, 2024. [https://berkeleyca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2024-07-09 Item 16 Referral Response Gap Analysis of Berkeley’s Homelessness.pdf](https://berkeleyca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2024-07-09%20Item%2016%20Referral%20Response%20Gap%20Analysis%20of%20Berkeley's%20Homelessness.pdf).

⁴ Alameda County. “City of Berkeley Homeless Census & Survey 2024 Executive Summary .” Alameda County Health Housing and Homelessness Services , 2024. <https://homelessness.acgov.org/homelessness-assets/docs/infographic/Berkeley%20PIT%202024%20Infographic.pdf>.

31, 2022. The site combined an RV parking area with on-site services and vehicle repair assistance, creating a holistic program for people living in their vehicles.

The SPARK site provided space for up to 40 RVs, and its residents – primarily individuals displaced from unsanctioned RV encampments at 8th and Harrison Streets – were able to access basic amenities like water, portable toilets, and showers, along with vehicle repair stipends for up to \$1,500 to help with RV maintenance. Additionally, the indoor site provided space for about 50 people and included small personal storage cubbies, a breakfast area, recreational space with a library and “movie theater” and a back storage area for residents to store larger items.⁵



(Photo credit: Supriya Yelimeli, Berkeleyside)

Case management and housing navigation services were also provided, supporting long-term housing transitions. The program served approximately 150 individuals during its operation, successfully connecting about 30 participants to permanent housing. While staff inquired about extending the lease, the owner of the property, San Francisco-based REDCO Development LLC expressed intent to build a life sciences hub on the property.

Ultimately, homelessness is a symptom of bigger, interconnecting trends that have grown worse in the last decade and are largely out of Berkeley’s control. Despite the challenges, Berkeley has adopted a humane approach that has been proven to work and made significant progress in addressing homelessness, a testament to the tremendous work of City Staff and the commitment of Berkeley residents alike. This item presents an opportunity for Berkeley to continue to lead on the issue of homelessness by asking the City Manager to explore novel and innovative approaches that remain rooted in our values.

REVIEW OF EXISTING PLANS, PROGRAMS, POLICIES, AND LAWS

⁵ Yelimeli, Supriya. “New West Berkeley homeless shelter opens as city emerges from COVID-19 pandemic.” Berkeleyside, July 2, 2021. <https://www.berkeleyside.org/2021/07/02/new-west-berkeley-homeless-shelter-grayson-street-2>

In July 2021, Berkeley City Council voted to endorse the All Home California Regional Action Plan (RAP), which seeks to reduce the number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness across the nine county Bay Area region by 75%.

Further, the City of Berkeley Administrative Regulations, Regulating Temporary Non-Commercial Objects on Sidewalks and in Parklets, Pursuant to BMC § 14.48.120, states that “Temporary Noncommercial (TNC) Objects,” as defined by code (e.g., personal belongings under immediate control, of certain size/weight, and not for sale), must not impede the safe and accessible Path of Travel, violate designated TNC Prohibited Areas, or otherwise pose health or safety risks on public sidewalks or parklets. These regulations permit removal of TNC objects that exceed defined size or time limits, obstruct pedestrian or disability access, or infringe on critical infrastructure such as fire hydrants, transit stops, or building entrances, and require advance notice (except in emergencies) before the city may remove such objects.⁶

Berkeley’s official encampment policy adopted in 2024, reaffirms the City’s commitment to offering interim housing whenever possible but authorizes removal of encampments without a shelter offer under six specific conditions, such as when an encampment poses a fire hazard, creates an imminent health risk, constitutes a public nuisance, is located on or dangerously close to a roadway, interferes with authorized construction or maintenance, or impedes city or utility operations.⁷

ACTIONS/ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

The City of Berkeley is known for its creative and innovative approach to public policy. While the City should remain on course and continue creating additional permanent housing, without a plethora of transitional and temporary housing and safe site options for unhoused individuals, many will continue to experience unsheltered homelessness with little access to resources. On any given night, some 24% of Berkeley’s unhoused residents sleep on the street or sidewalk. This item recognizes that it is neither sustainable nor suitable for an average of 445 people to camp on our public sidewalks, streets, and parks every single night.

While there is no panacea for homelessness, the City can help people experiencing homelessness live with dignity by ensuring they have a safe space to access personal hygiene care and resources with their belongings and pets, remaining within their community and support networks.

CONSULTATION/OUTREACH OVERVIEW AND RESULTS

⁶ City of Berkeley, Municipal Code, Chapter 14.480, Section 120 (2018).

<https://berkeleyca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Administrative%20Regulation%2010.2.pdf>

⁷ City of Berkeley. Encampment Policy Resolution to Promote Healthy and Safe Neighborhoods and Related First Reading of Ordinance Amending Chapter 14.48 of the Berkeley Municipal Code, September 10, 2024. [https://berkeleyca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2024-09-10 Item 37 Encampment Policy Resolution.pdf](https://berkeleyca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2024-09-10%20Item%2037%20Encampment%20Policy%20Resolution.pdf).

The author and co-sponsors consulted with City Staff and numerous community stakeholders including but not limited to unhoused community members, business representatives, non-profit leaders, and advocates.

Councilmember O’Keefe discussed the item with the City Manager and he expressed an interest in working with City Staff to evaluate possible locations to expand alternative housing options. Further, Councilmember O’Keefe and Mayor Ishii met with the Deputy City Manager and head of Neighborhood Services to solicit their input and feedback, incorporating it into this item. Councilmember O’Keefe also met with residents of the Harrison Street encampment and spoke with homeless advocates, who expressed support for the idea.

Moreover, Councilmember Lunaparra hosted a Forum on Homelessness in early December that was specifically focused on soliciting ways to address homelessness from unhoused people themselves, and a camping area was repeatedly brought up as something that would be beneficial to Berkeley’s unhoused residents and the city as a whole.

RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

This item proposes identifying locations that can be used for shorter-term solutions such as City-managed RV and car parks, indoor/outdoor camping areas, and/or additional congregate or non-congregate sites that may provide immediate, emergency shelter and relief for unhoused people, ensuring they will be connected to resources while the City works toward more permanent solutions, and preserves access to Berkeley’s public parks and spaces for all.

IMPLEMENTATION, ADMINISTRATION, AND ENFORCEMENT

This referral exclusively asks the City Manager to identify and develop a list of locations for the creation of a safe, alternative housing site. Implementation will not take place until further Council action. This referral does not include discussion of how a potential site could be operationalized or administered. Blueprints and precedent already exist and have been proven successful for such implementation at the Grayson Street Shelter and safe RV Zone, and we request staff consult these plans to inform their work.

Feasibility should be determined under the assumption that city funds will be used to purchase/lease and manage the eventual site or sites. The intent of this referral is to provide additional safe housing options for Berkeley’s unsheltered residents and not to address the issue on a regional level. While identifying a source of funding is not within the scope of this referral, the search process should be done with the goal of ensuring local control of any eventual housing sites.

Anecdotal conversations with many unhoused people and their advocates reveal that the following criteria should be taken into consideration by City Staff when evaluating possible sites for a camping area:

- Public transit accessibility

- Proximity to existing homeless services, such as Dorothy Day House or the Sacred Rest Drop-In Center
- Access to food, electricity, potable water, on-site showers, laundry, and sanitation
- Regular trash and waste removal
- ADA compliance

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

N/A

FISCAL IMPACTS

Fiscal impacts limited to staff time.

OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION

The City Manager should return to the City Council with a list of sites to provide safe alternative housing options, a report detailing the concerns and roadblocks to implementation, and information regarding steps the City can take to initiate and/or secure a site for such shelter.

Due to the urgent nature of this public health and humanitarian crisis, this item asks the City Manager to expedite this process and return to Council as soon as feasible.

CONTACT

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