

# CITY BEAT: Homeless workshop highlighted big change in Fresno

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Posted by George Hostetter on February 25, 2014

Fresno's debate on the homeless has taken a dramatic turn.

The turn is this: Homelessness as an all-consuming issue that divides the city is gone.

I'm guessing it's gone forever. The key step was last summer's decision by Mayor Ashley Swearingin to raze four high-profile downtown homeless encampments.

What I'm saying is the message that came through loud and clear at the City Council's Feb. 13 workshop on homelessness.

First, let me emphasize what I'm not saying.

I'm not saying homelessness has disappeared from Fresno. It hasn't. A census of the local homeless population was recently conducted by the Veterans Administration and volunteers. Preliminary results should be released soon. There are several definitions of homelessness, but the census almost certainly will reveal a population of chronic homeless in the hundreds. That is a humanitarian and policy challenge for all of us.

And I'm not saying homelessness will soon disappear. That's not the way life works. The unfortunate and the aimless and the addicted will always be with us. Part of our mission as a just society is to try to help them.

But I am saying the local political landscape on homelessness was dramatically transformed when city officials found the will to systematically remove the camps, then put their reputations (and, perhaps, their careers) on the line by vowing the camps would not return on their watch.

The workshop was spearheaded by Kelli Furtado (Swearingin's deputy chief of staff) and City Manager Bruce Rudd. Officials from the Fresno Housing Authority and Police Department also took part. The workshop's stated aim was to give the council an update six months after the camps were razed. The unstated aim was to prove that the administration was right to get rid of the camps.

The workshop focused on the three camps south of Ventura Avenue.

The biggest was the camp on Santa Clara Avenue near the Poverello House. This camp spilled onto F and E streets almost to Ventura.

A camp nearly as big was located in what was once Germantown, near California and E streets. This camp was between an alley and Highway 99. It was nicknamed the Cut Throat Alley Camp for good reason.

The third camp was along H Street from about Santa Clara to the Highway 41 overpass.

A fourth camp, located near an irrigation ditch not far from the City Yard at Divisadero and G streets was razed last year but did not figure prominently in the workshop.

About 250 to 300 people were displaced when the Santa Clara, Cut Throat Alley and H Street camps were razed. An estimated 50 tons of stuff was carted away for storage or disposal. More than 100 people were placed into temporary or permanent housing thanks to the Housing Authority and Fresno First Steps Home (a nonprofit focused on helping the homeless). About 50 homeless people still sleep at night near The Pov, but are told to move along at sunrise.

The cost of cleaning up the three camps was \$141,931.

Rudd displayed a photo on the council chamber's overhead screen. It showed a bounce-house on the dirt that had once been the Cut Throat Alley Camp. There was a long extension cord. Parents living on E Street next to the former camp site were throwing a birthday for their 7-year-old daughter. They could have put the bounce-house in their backyard. But, Rudd said, they wanted to make a statement about their reborn neighborhood. So they put the bounce-house on a stretch of dirt that once was home to squatters and squalor.

“That picture is worth a thousand words,” Rudd said.

I occasionally walked through the three camps. The Santa Clara camp was where a man got shot and killed. The Cut Throat Alley Camp had a huge pile of trash at the midway point. A camp resident would throw his discards there. Another camp resident would fish through the discards looking for something of value. I followed a fire truck to the H Street camp one Saturday afternoon. A camp resident, angry at his mother, had set his hovel on fire, then ran. The fire spread to the hovel next door. A man and woman barely got out with their lives. The woman was barefoot and wearing only a man's T-shirt. Somebody gave her a blanket. The fire destroyed everything else.

Rudd said the city is committing \$1 million this fiscal year to Housing First rental assistance. He said Fresno First Steps Home has a kitty of about \$1 million. He said Fresno County has set aside about \$650,000 for emergency homeless grants.

The city has razed homeless camps in the past.

“What are we going to do different this time?” Rudd said. “We are committed to a sustained effort” to help.

But, Rudd added, those receiving the help must commit to basic community standards. Among those is obeying the law.

Council workshops aren't open to public comment. However, Council President Steve Brandau advised the audience that he would hold unscheduled oral communication immediately after the workshop. This is something offered at every council meeting. Audience members can address the council on any topic for a maximum of three minutes. Brandau's decision had the effect of creating a public-comment period for the workshop.

Past council debates on homelessness generated passionate comment from the public. It wasn't unusual for several dozen people to speak. But only four people spoke on Feb. 13. Two speakers praised the value of authorized homeless camp grounds, something that has yet to come to Fresno and, if city officials have their way, never will. The other two speakers told city officials what everybody knows — there are lots of homeless people still out there.

All four speakers spoke softly and to the point. Then they sat down. No drama. No threats.

I watched it all, then came to five conclusions.

1.) Parts of Fresno will always have homeless challenges. For example, on Friday, Feb. 7, I left The Bee newsroom and headed on foot to the neighborhoods where the three camps had been. I walked south on E Street toward Ventura.

It was raining. I was on the east side of E. I was about halfway between Stanislaus and Fresno streets when I noticed a man on the west side of E, right across from me. He had a shopping cart full of stuff. He was screaming and cursing. I've heard this before from the homeless. This guy was different. He seemed on the verge of losing control.

I hurried on. The man crossed the street to my side, then pushed his cart in my direction. He was enraged. I turned around in time to see him take off his T-shirt. Now he was bare-chested, cursing to the heavens in the rain, coming my way.

I crossed Fresno Street and continued walking south on E. He turned east on Fresno Street. I was safe.

Any big city will have homeless people like this man. Society can only do its best to help them. Fresno is doing that.

2.) The murder in the Santa Clara camp last year was a tipping point. City officials said the camps had to be razed because they were public-safety hazards to homeless and non-homeless alike. No one can ever again suggest otherwise. Anyone trying to push for city-authorized "safe and clean" homeless camps, places where the homeless create and operate their own society without interference from City Hall, has a big hurdle to clear.

3.) Fresno City Hall seemed to always take a beating in courtrooms whenever it tried to remove homeless camps and bring order to neighborhoods. In this latest round of camp razing, city officials wore body cameras to record all contacts with the homeless. Members of the city's homeless task force (police officers, community sanitation workers, code enforcement officers) also wear body cameras.

City Hall got smart. Perhaps the judges have, as well.

4.) The visual shock created by the homeless camps put City Hall at a huge disadvantage in the public-relations battle. City officials would trumpet their sincerity about helping the homeless. Then the opponents of city officials would point to the sprawling, lawless camps and ask: “This is your idea of help?”

The camps’ disappearance took that weapon from City Hall’s opponents.

5.) Last, but not least, I refer to another of the pictures that Rudd displayed on the council chamber screen during the workshop. Even more than the 7-year-old girl’s bounce-house at the former Cut Throat Alley Camp, this picture spoke volumes about the dramatically changed landscape of homelessness in Fresno.

The picture displayed the branding icons of all the agencies and non-profits that are teaming up to help the region’s homeless.

I had trouble counting them — at least 20 in all.

Naomi’s House; Turning Point of Central California, Inc.; 100,000 Homes; Fresno EOC; Fresno County; Fresno Housing Authority; City of Fresno; City of Clovis; U.S. Interagency on Homelessness; Veterans Administration; Fresno Madera Continuum of Care; Fresno First Steps Home; United Way of Fresno County; California Policy Academy to Reduce Chronic Homelessness; Marjoree Mason Center; Resources for Independence/Central Valley; Valley Teen Rescue; Fresno Rescue Mission; The Poverello House; Clinica Sierra Vista ... then I ran out of ink. Sorry if I missed your group.

The officials in these agencies probably don’t see eye-to-eye on all homeless issues. But it was clear from the Feb. 13 workshop that these 20 groups and probably another 20 or 30 that didn’t get mentioned are committed to a future that 1.) does all that is humanly possible for the homeless, and 2.) ensures that sprawling homeless camps like those in Fresno’s recent past never reappear.

That’s the kind of progress that turns me into a progressive.