

Pair of ballot measures would compel city, county action on homelessness

Feb 26, 2022, 10:25am PST

Advocates for a pair of initiatives that could appear on Sacramento city and county ballots this November say their measures could bring in state funding to help tackle homelessness.

Earlier this month Rivkah Sass, former director of the Sacramento Public Library, and political consultant Daniel Conway notified the city of Sacramento of their intention to start gathering signatures for what they're calling the Emergency Temporary Shelter and Enforcement Act of 2022.

The initiative would require the city to authorize enough emergency shelter and camping space to house at least 75% of the people currently sleeping on the streets. At the same time, it would make camping on public or private property not designated as a safe camping site illegal and a public nuisance. The initiative wouldn't allow the city to cite anyone based on that



DENNIS MCCOY | SACRAMENTO BUSINESS JOURNAL

The number of people sleeping on Sacramento streets has exploded during the pandemic. Now, voters could be asked to weigh in on how to tackle the issue.

policy, however, unless there was shelter or safe camping space available and they refused to go there.

"We're at a place now where this type of model that's in this ballot measure is something that's increasingly being adopted around the state," said Conway.

Conway said that in the past three years, his work has centered on issues around homelessness. He has also been working with a group in Los Angeles that filed a lawsuit against Los Angeles County, asking the court to impose a legally enforceable mandate requiring the county to provide more shelter space to house the homeless population.

"Local governments can't use parks and sidewalks and river ways as the default holding area for people who need help," Conway said.

Conway is also working with Sacramento County Supervisor Patrick Kennedy to craft a similar ballot initiative for the county. He said that initiative would have more emphasis on the county's mental health, addiction and human assistance services.

"The people who the county actually have the resources and the programming to help, the county would have the obligation to help at scale," Conway said.

Conway said that, after they have a plan in place, the city and county could get state help in implementing it.

The state budget Gov. Gavin Newsom signed last year included a historic \$12 billion investment toward tackling homelessness, much of which is allocated toward grants local governments can request to create permanent housing, temporary shelter or otherwise implement a plan to address homelessness. Newsom wants to add another \$2 billion to the effort this year.

"Why don't we get it together and get to the front of the line," Conway said.

Conway said bringing some of that money to Sacramento was one of his goals in proposing the ballot measure. He said if the city and

county work together on a coordinated, comprehensive model, they have a better chance of getting state funding.

“Yes, it’s about getting something on the ballot, but it’s also about that record number of dollars in state funding,” he said. “We need to keep that in Sacramento.”

Kennedy said the exact language of the county ballot initiative is still being worked out, but once it’s proposed he’ll bring it to the city/county 2x2 committee on homelessness, where he sits along with Supervisor Rich Desmond, Mayor Darrell Steinberg and Councilmember Jay Schenirer.

Kennedy said he hopes to bring the ballot initiative to the entire Board of Supervisors this spring. If four of the five supervisors approve it, it can go on the November ballot without going through the signature-gathering process.

“I think that something like this will light a fire under all of us,” Kennedy said.

He said that while the county has ramped up its funding for its homeless assistance programs, there is still tremendous need.

“I still think that we’re making incremental changes, and clearly this is a crisis,” he said.

Kennedy said that the ballot initiative is similar to the “right to housing” ordinance Steinberg introduced last year. That proposal would create a legal obligation for the city to provide housing — and unsheltered people would have the right to sue the city if it doesn’t follow through. At the same time, anyone sleeping outside would be obligated to accept housing if it is available.

“We can’t continue to let people just live in some of the situations that we see out there. Some of these encampments, you see lawlessness, you see a lack of sanitary conditions,” Kennedy said. “But you can’t tackle that unless you offer some alternatives.”

Emily Hamann
Staff Writer
Sacramento Business Journal

