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Homeless Strategy Misses the Mark

Plans for 24/7 beach restrooms, storage at Westminster Senior Center and housing near the Venice Canals will only make things worse

By Mark Ryavec

The author is president of the nonprofit Venice Stakeholders Association.

Los Angeles City Councilman Mike Bonin's recent proposals to address the homeless crisis in Venice remind me of a story.

A guy comes out of a bar one evening and sees a young woman down on her hands and knees, looking for something in the street. He asks what the problem is and she says that she's lost her car keys. So he gets down with her and starts looking, too. After searching for several minutes and finding nothing he asks, "Are you sure you lost your keys here?" to which she replies, "No, but the light is better over here."

Bonin is similarly moving ahead, without public hearings, with three proposals which have been in the public light for a long time, though they have not received resident support. And for good reason; these projects will not soon get any homeless folks off our streets and in some instances will just make the situation worse.

The first recycled idea is to open up the many restrooms along the Venice Beach Recreation Area for 24 hours every day. This would require amendments to both the city's midnight to 5 a.m. beach curfew and the 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. park closure rule. The Venice Stakeholders Association believes this is just another instance of enablement that will make it easier for transients to live along the boardwalk and walk streets while getting none of them into housing. It runs counter to "best practices," as evidenced by Santa Monica's closure at night of its beach and park restrooms.

Reflecting his growing tendency to foist his agenda on residents without any neighborhood hearings and due process, Bonin has already introduced a motion to City Council to make this change, ignoring residents' previous opposition to weakening the curfew and opening up the restrooms at night. Several years ago when the Coastal Commission threatened to take the city to court over the curfew (which has been in place since 1989), LAPD Pacific Division Cmdr. Brian Johnson asked residents to support the curfew and residents flooded the council office demanding that the curfew be retained.

The second old idea is to create even more storage for homeless people's possessions, in this instance at the Westminster Senior Center on Pacific Avenue. Bonin claims storage space is needed to entice homeless individuals to leave the street and enter shelters because



More street outreach is needed to help the homeless get off the beach and into housing

they can be assured that their stuff is safe. However, neither Chrysalis, which operates the extensive storage facility downtown, nor the volunteers operating the smaller existing storage facility on Venice Beach have produced evidence that the ability to store their stuff has facilitated any transients moving into shelters or permanent housing.

The third reshod proposal is construction of homeless housing over the parking lot on the Venice Boulevard median between Pacific and Dell avenues. A similar proposal for the Electric Avenue parking lots behind Abbot Kinney Boulevard during a former councilwoman's tenure was roundly rejected by residents.

We have three objections to the current

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Further, the need for storage is only acute during the three months that the city's winter shelters are operating. It makes little sense to turn over the Westminster Senior Center for that short-term use when many Venice residents would prefer that the building become a combination Venice Historical Museum and a tourist information center for the 10 million people who visit Venice Beach every year.

Nearby residents fear that drawing several hundred transients to the center will bring back camping on the adjacent park grounds, and the crime and late night noise that the LAPD only recently brought under control. While our organization questions the efficacy of storage facilities, any of the warehouses along nearby Del Rey Avenue, which are not near residences, could be leased by the city for this use, saving the Westminster building for the museum and visitor serving uses.

proposal. Right now many residents living near the beach are held hostage on warm weekends and throughout the summer because if they move their cars from street spaces they will not find parking when they return. This parking scarcity results from this area of Venice being constructed before the widespread ownership of automobiles, and thus with little onsite parking. To address this, the Venice median lot is long overdue for conversion to a three-story automated facility to meet the demand for more parking for both residents and those 10 million annual visitors.

The second objection is that 90 units of homeless housing on the site will come with its own parking demand. While the homeless will in most instances arrive without cars, many will not remain carless. As their lives improve, they will acquire cars and that will either rob parking from other residents or reduce visitor parking capacity.

The Los Angeles Housing Department reported to the Venice Neighborhood Council Ad-Hoc Committee on Homelessness in 2009 that Venice already had twice as many affordable housing units per capita as other parts of our council district. One can see these large multifamily buildings throughout Oakwood; most are flagged with the name Breezes del Mar.

Instead of robbing Venice of the chance to build much needed beach-adjacent parking on the Venice Boulevard site, the city should look at the many underutilized city parking lots in Westchester, West Los Angeles and Mar Vista that experience far less demand and where building homeless housing over parking would not compete with the parking needs of a world-renowned tourist destination.

Finally, as we have seen with other permanent supportive facilities, many of the tenants arrive in the grip of addiction or mental illness and continue their noxious and, on occasion, violent behavior. The residents living next to this site are already regularly accosted by homeless campers with these problems; just last year a well-known actor and his pregnant wife were the victims of a mentally ill female camper who scaled their six foot wall in the middle of the night and illegally entered their home. Concentrating 90 chronically homeless individuals in this one location is a recipe for disaster for this neighborhood.

We ask the councilman to instead focus his efforts on more immediate efforts to get campers off the street and beach, instead of making it easier for them to live and store their possessions there while we await projects that won't come to fruition for another four or five years.

He should fund more case workers for Venice who will enroll more street campers into the Coordinated Entry System, and then get them into leased apartment buildings and houses wherever they can be found.

In this vein we applaud his award of \$50,000 to the LAPD Homeless Task Force, which has a track record of getting beach campers into rehab or housing or returning them to safe family members out of state.

However, he has not responded to our call to fund the Teen Project Venice PAD, which has proven successful at getting 16-to-24 year olds off the street and into housing and back into school.

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