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EDITORIAL EDITORIALS OPINION

Don't let NIMBYs — or weak-kneed politicians — stand in the way of homeless housing

By THE TIMES EDITORIAL BOARD
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A homeless woman walks in a Venice street at dusk. (Los Angeles Times)

"Homes end homelessness." That was the simple and ultimately persuasive slogan of the Proposition HHH campaign in 2016. In November of that year, an overwhelming 77% of Los Angeles city voters opted to raise their own property taxes to pay for $1.2 billion in homeless housing — 10,000 units to be built over a decade. Politicians exulted in the win and vowed that after years of short-lived strategies and half-

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Never in this city has so much money been available for housing the homeless. Yet the hard part is just beginning. Despite the overwhelming support for Proposition HHH, virtually everyone involved in the process now agrees that fierce NIMBY resistance to homeless housing in some communities and the lack of political will by elected officials in the face of that resistance are the biggest potential impediments to the rollout of housing on the scale and timeline needed to stem the increase in homelessness. There are more than 34,000 homeless people in the city of Los Angeles.

"We did the glitzy part, but now we have to get the work done, brick by brick, block by block" says Councilman Marqueece Harris-Dawson, who represents South Los Angeles. "I predict we'll hit a wall — that we'll get stuck."



That wall could be erected by the City Council itself, whose members have nearly unfettered say over what gets built and what gets blocked in their districts — but who have been extremely reluctant over the years to challenge the fierce opposition of their most vocal constituents on the issue of homelessness. Even as the crisis has intensified, they've wavered. Councilman Jose Huizar, for instance, stalled the development for nearly two years of a well-designed, modest residential project in Boyle Heights that would have housed a mere 24 homeless people, partly because of objections from the business owner next door. Councilman Joe Buscaino caved to protesters in San Pedro and ditched his own perfectly reasonable plan for a storage facility where homeless people could put

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December 2016 because, he said, the Lincoln Heights community had not been consulted; the result was a yearlong delay.

"Political will is now the biggest challenge," says former City Controller Wendy Greuel, who sits on the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority's Board of Commissioners. "Will the City Council and the mayor and the county say, 'Yes, we will put this housing in our neighborhoods'?"

WITHOUT A HOME

They're part of the Los Angeles streetscape, as familiar as the swaying palm trees and idling traffic, living under freeways, alongside riverbeds and on canyon hillsides. The mentally ill, the drug addicts, the economically disadvantaged, many with their life belongings in a backpack or shopping cart. In this ongoing series, Without a Home, The Times is examining the crisis of homelessness in our region. Full coverage ↗

Fifteen months after the ballot measure passed, only two projects with HHH funding have broken ground. Of eight city-owned properties identified two years ago as sites for homeless housing, not one is near construction — and these were supposed to be the easy projects, the low-hanging fruit. The city has funded 416 homeless housing units that were already in the pipeline, which is pretty good — and no one ever thought the crisis would be addressed in a single year — but new projects aren't being moved toward approval nearly quickly enough.

Until the mayor and the members of the City Council treat the building of these 10,000 units of housing with the kind of extraordinary urgency this crisis requires — the kind that the federal and state governments bestowed upon, for example, the rebuilding of the broken Santa Monica Freeway after the Northridge earthquake — they simply will not be built. And they must be built. Supportive housing in particular — which offers not just a place to live but also access to job counseling and mental health and substance abuse treatment, among other things — is the best long-term solution for the chronically homeless, whose cases are the most difficult to solve. A substantial number of these housing units must be located in every single council district. They cannot just be concentrated in poor

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There will be opposition, vocal and angry. There already is. But ultimately, every council member must support a fair share of this housing in his or her district — and push back against those constituents who object by rote. We expect council members to lead rather than follow, to explain why this housing is necessary and to push as many reasonable projects as possible through the gantlet of City Council approvals. We expect Mayor Eric Garcetti to stand up publicly and fight for those projects as well. The mayor, who is said to be contemplating his next career steps, has an opportunity to repair the long-standing perception that he is unwilling to take on tough public battles. Surely he must be aware that his mayoralty will ultimately be judged on how he handles this crisis.

> "Surely Garcetti must be aware that his mayoralty will ultimately be judged on how he handles this crisis."

In recent weeks, there have been signs of progress. There's talk of transforming city-owned parking lots into housing for the chronically homeless, and a separate move is underway to begin converting motel rooms to supportive-housing units. There's also a proposed ordinance to speed up the time-consuming review process for approving permanent supportive housing projects, and Garcetti has joined other California mayors to request an additional $1.5 billion in state aid to address homelessness.

Members of the City Council seem to be feeling the pressure for action as well. Cedillo put the Lincoln Heights parking lots back on the city-owned property housing list in December (after his reelection and a phone call from The Times asking why he'd taken them off). Huizar called The Times just before this series was put to bed to say he'd changed his mind and would urge the City Council to approve the Boyle Heights project as soon as possible. (Huizar has backed a number of other supportive-housing projects in his district in the past.) And Buscaino has been pushing to get a homeless storage facility set up at another site in San Pedro. Those are encouraging steps.

We need to pause to say a word on behalf of Councilman Mike Bonin: more

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unfairly savaged by some of his constitu

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members be that bold and put the well-being of the city over the short-sighted fears of some constituents.

As the executive director Venice Community Housing, Becky Dennison helps to develop housing for homeless and low-income people and to provide support services.

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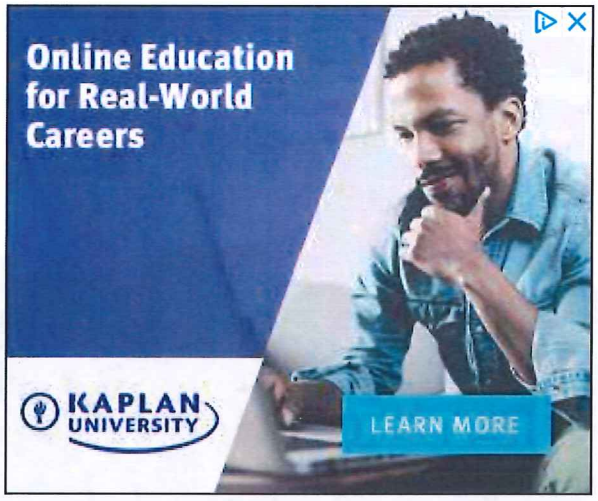


A developer has proposed building 140 units of housing in this Venice parking lot, including 68 for supportive housing. Opponents have complained that their community is being saddled with more homeless housing units than other parts of the city. (Los Angeles Times)

It is not surprising that some city residents fear homeless housing in their neighborhoods. Roughly a third of homeless people are mentally ill. Many are substance abusers. Some seem — or are — threatening. Residents worry about security, of course, and also about what will happen to property values if homeless people move in nearby. Some believe they're being unfairly asked to bear a disproportionate share of the burden for a citywide problem. There is undoubtedly an element of prejudice — even of racism — in some people's objections to homeless housing, but others voice reasonable concerns or harbor common misconceptions about homelessness. There are plenty of legitimate land-use questions to be asked — about density, parking, height, design — although some opponents hide their fears and prejudices behind those more mundane concerns.

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But the fact remains that housing must be built and residents who live nearby must come to understand that it is better to have people housed and treated than to have them living in tent encampments on the streets. And neighbors *can* be persuaded of that. In the end, although there is often a small but vocal and implacable group of opponents, most residents are open to living near a well-designed, well-managed homeless housing development, according to providers who have seen onetime NIMBYs become supportive neighbors over time. Officials say their research shows that most people are predisposed to help the homeless, and that while they are a little apprehensive of homeless housing in their neighborhoods when they first hear about it, they can be persuaded by the right arguments, guarantees and reassurances.

Since 2007, the city of Los Angeles has helped finance the building of 2,667 units of permanent supportive housing, according to officials.

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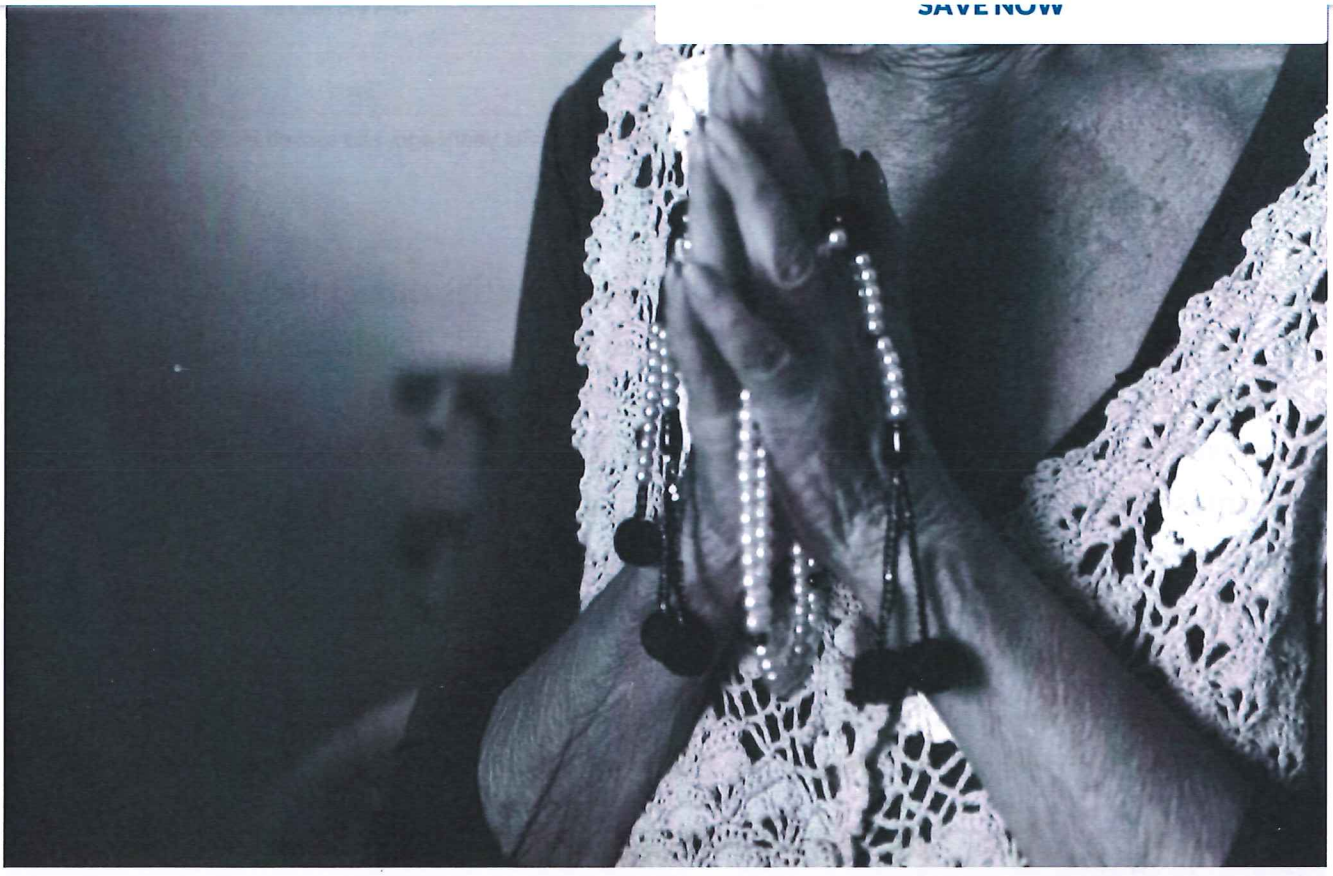
Emily Martiniuk, 65, once lived in a shelter and panhandled on the streets. Six years ago, she moved into LA Family Housing's Palo Verde complex.

Homeless housing will not be imposed on communities thoughtlessly or arbitrarily. When a potential HHH project is proposed, developers must get neighbors' input — that is mandated by the city. When a West L.A. community was worried last year about what the affordable-housing development firm Thomas Safran & Associates would build on a piece of city land that holds a now-shuttered animal shelter, the developers held at least 10 meetings in the neighborhood and took people on a tour of their other low-income and homeless housing developments. Members of the firm also assured the neighborhood that the tenants — low-income seniors and homeless families— would all be background-checked. The project got the blessing of the neighborhood council.



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Emily Martiniuk holds her prayer beads in her studio apartment in in North Hollywood. (Los Angeles Times)

To answer concerns about living next door to people with mental health or substance abuse problems, service providers recite their many success stories. Take, for example, the case of Emily Martiniuk, 65, who lived in a shelter, panhandled on the streets, and once stood on a bridge contemplating suicide. Six years ago, Martiniuk moved into LA Family Housing's Palo Verde complex. Now, she makes some money as a notary public, takes medication for her bipolar illness and speaks to groups about homelessness.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that there are never troubling incidents in homeless housing. In the same building where Martiniuk has thrived, another resident, with mental health problems that include paranoia, was deemed by service providers to need more intensive care. She was eventually evicted. Service providers absolutely should take steps to ensure that the safety concerns of neighbors are addressed. Residents of supportive housing who can't or won't abide by the rules can be removed.

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parts of the city. Every community shoul

Indeed, every community should. City Council President Herb Wesson has introduced a resolution calling on all council members to pledge to approve 222 units of homeless housing in their districts by July 2020. That's a start, but now they have to stick to it; the resolution itself is nonbinding. And more housing than that will be necessary.

Permanent supportive housing is not a quick fix. But it has the potential to be a permanent fix.

This is the third in a series.

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