

‘Sunbreak Ranch’ Homeless Camp Concept Gaining Momentum



A homeless tent camp at a San Diego city maintenance yard at 20th and B streets in 2017. A new "safe sleeping" site was recently opened at the location. (John Gibbins/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

The idea of setting aside a large space to provide shelter and services for unhoused people has been proposed before, but never happened. But many civic leaders are pushing for it again.

BY [MICHAEL SMOLENS](#) COLUMNIST
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Five years ago, artist and businessman George Mullen was a lonely voice shouting into the wind about Otay Mesa.

Here, he said, is where San Diego should build a large facility to help homeless people get back on their feet, with shelters, health care, mental health assistance, substance abuse programs and other services.

The idea was dismissed by decision-makers.

[Mullen](#) then pitched the idea for federal land near Marine Corps Air Station Miramar. It received much the same response, in no small part because of the multi-government, bureaucratic nightmare of putting it together.

But in recent months the concept — if not the sites — gained traction, with endorsements from dozens of civic leaders.

The proposal has a long way to go, but it has come farther than many expected.

“I’m confident they’re going to get something done here,” said Jack McGrory, businessman and former San Diego city manager who has endorsed the Sunbreak Ranch concept.

McGrory said a recent meeting was held — attended by supporters and others working to reduce homelessness, including at least one member of Mayor Todd Gloria’s staff — to discuss various ideas, including Sunbreak Ranch.

Gloria spokesperson Rachel Laing on Thursday noted the city already has been and will be putting this concept into practice at multiple locations.

“The difference is we’re not in favor of isolating people geographically, away from services and jobs. . .” Laing said in a text message.

Regardless, McGrory said, “Everybody seems to agree with the concept. The problem is the site.”

Ah, the site. That’s a familiar problem — and a big one. Even much smaller homeless facilities have had difficulty finding a home. Sometimes the issue is logistics, but often they’re torpedoed because people don’t want them nearby, whether local residents or elected officials who represent them.

Now, try finding a site that McGrory said would likely need to be between 30 acres and 50 acres — in a more convenient area than where Mullen has suggested, if not right in the center of the city.

The idea of a big, all-in-one homeless campus is not new. A handful of years ago, a plan to build one that would shelter and otherwise assist potentially thousands of people on a city maintenance yard at [20th and B streets](#) had a number of powerful supporters and gained a head of steam.

Schematics were drafted and logistics were being worked out, but the proposal was scuttled for a variety of reasons, some of them still unclear. That proposal seemed in line with what came to be in San Antonio, Texas — the [Haven for Hope](#) homeless center that has received positive [national attention](#).

Earlier this year, leaders of the nonprofit Lucky Duck Foundation in San Diego [proposed](#) erecting large tent shelters for hundreds of people on Inspiration Point in Balboa Park.

Opponents, led by park advocates, blocked the plan.

Eventually, a consensus formed around two so-called safe sleeping sites not far away. One [recently opened](#) at 20th and B streets that can accommodate more than 130 tents, and another with room for some 400 tents at Balboa Park's Parking Lot O near the Naval Hospital is expected to open later this year.

Those and other existing homeless facilities provide, or will provide, what Sunbreak Ranch proposes: shelter and on-site access to agencies and nonprofits that offer a wide variety of assistance.

Not everybody favors the camp-shelter approach, including some advocates for homeless people. But many agree that if they're going to happen, they need to be scaled up significantly, given the scope of the problem.

The recent annual point-in-time homeless [count](#) tallied 3,285 unsheltered people in the city of San Diego, a 32 percent increase over 2022. Countywide, the unsheltered population grew 26 percent to 5,171 people.

Overall, 10,264 homeless people were counted, including those in shelters — a 22 percent increase.

It is widely believed these numbers understate the problem.

Gloria has increased the number of shelter beds, expanded homeless services and provided more outreach to people living on the street, but he continues to face pressure to do more. Opinion polls show homelessness at the top of local concerns and residents have become increasingly vocal that something be done about ever-present unauthorized homeless encampments.

That drumbeat is growing. The 100-member Sunbreak Ranch “endorsement team” listed on the project’s [website](#) includes business and community leaders, elected officials and organizations.

To name a handful: businessman-philanthropist Malin Burnham, developer Tom Sudbury, former U.S. Attorney Robert Brewer, law professor Laura M. Padilla, restaurant owner Mary Pappas, county Supervisor Joel Anderson, Coronado Mayor Richard Bailey and the San Diego Police Officers Association.

San Diego native Bill Walton, NBA Hall of Fame member and outspoken critic of Gloria’s performance on homelessness, signed on with Sunbreak Ranch earlier this year. He and Mullen co-authored an opinion [column](#) in the Times of San Diego making the case for the project that drew news coverage across the country.

For a Sunbreak Ranch-type camp to work, Mullen and supporters said there needs to be strict enforcement against homeless people inhabiting public property and they must be compelled to use shelter beds.

Critics maintain the primary purpose of Sunbreak Ranch-like proposals is to get homeless people out of sight by rounding them up, with some opponents calling it a “concentration camp.”

Mullen obviously doesn’t see it that way.

Homelessness in San Diego “is a human catastrophe,” he said.

“We’ve all been shocked at what’s happening to our homeless brothers and sisters,” he added, “but we’re also shocked at what’s happening to our city.”

The city uses its power to cite and sometimes arrest people hunkered down in some public areas using a so-called “encroachment” ordinance.

A new anti-camping law backed by Gloria that takes effect Sunday is designed to give the city more power to do that. The catch is that under a federal court ruling the city has to have shelter beds available, and offer them, before moving people out or citing them.

McGrory supports the ordinance, but said the city needs much more shelter space to make it work. He said the need is for around 2,500 additional beds, though he said he believes a big camp likely would have to start at about 1,000 beds and phase in more.

Mullen contends philanthropy can provide the bulk of the funding to get a Sunbreak Ranch up and running. McGrory doesn’t think San Diego’s philanthropic base is big enough for that, and said the project will need local, state and federal funding, which he said can be obtained.

When Mullen launched the Sunbreak idea in 2017, he thought San Diego had hit rock bottom with homelessness.

“I didn’t think it could get worse,” he said.

It did.

The increase in this year’s annual homeless count was jarring. But Mullen finds another statistic more disturbing.

In 2019, [165](#) homeless people died in the county, according to the Medical Examiner’s Office. In 2022, it was estimated at [588](#).



Michael Smolens is a columnist for The San Diego Union-Tribune with a long history of political coverage. He was government and politics editor at the U-T from 1992 until late 2017. During that time he had overseen local, state and national political news. As a reporter, he covered politics at all levels, including San Diego City Hall, and did a four-year stint in the news organization's Sacramento bureau in the late 1980's. A native of Wellesley, Mass., Smolens graduated from the University of Massachusetts/Amherst, where he majored in English and journalism. Smolens also attended Elmira College in New York and was a goalie on the school's hockey team. Declining reflexes persuaded him not to seek a career in the NHL.

Sunbreak links of interest:

[Sunbreak Ranch Endorsement Team](#)

[Take Back San Diego Founders Team](#)

Sunbreak's two websites which interrelate:

[Sunbreak Ranch](#)

[Take Back San Diego](#)

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