

UT Editorial Attack on Sunbreak Ranch a ‘Slap in Face’ to Many Working to End Homelessness

By Casey Gwinn



Tarps covered homeless tents and shelters on downtown streets. Photo by Chris Stone.

A recent vacuous newspaper editorial on the Sunbreak Ranch proposal was a disappointment. It served no purpose but to shine a bright light on the lack of meaningful solutions to homelessness in downtown San Diego.

Criticism, sarcasm, and cynicism are not thought leadership and add nothing to the solution for homelessness. The San Diego Union-Tribune did not just mock originator George Mullen. It mocked all of us who want a real solution to what has happened to downtown San Diego and so many other cities.

The editorial was a slap in the face to hundreds of business and political leaders who have endorsed and support the vision for Sunbreak Ranch.

Hundreds of millions of dollars already spent on the homelessness issue has solved nothing. The assumption in the editorial that downtown should be where we allow the homeless to live, as if by right, was so offensive to so many of us who have worked so hard to create a beautiful downtown San Diego over the last three decades.

The homeless would choose Sunbreak Ranch if they were not allowed to live with impunity on the streets of downtown. If they had to face consequences for urinating and defecating in doorways, littering everywhere with impunity, shoplifting without accountability, and aggressively panhandling tourists and residents alike — they would choose Sunbreak Ranch.

When city leaders first envisioned a residential downtown in the 1980s, we imagined a vibrant nightlife, a dynamic village with urban living, and community amenities that would cause San Diego to thrive and grow. It would be a magnet for young families and couples and singles without children. It would be urban living at its best in one of the best climates in the country.

When we first started developing downtown and re-invigorating the original dream of Alonzo Horton, we did not imagine that one day thought leaders of the city, like the Union-Tribune editorial board, would abdicate responsibility to lead and support policies that invite the homeless to choose downtown as the place to store their belongings, litter at will, and damage the businesses that we rely upon for our tax base.

The complex mental health issues and public safety issues engendered by allowing the homeless population to do what they wish, where they wish, without intervention or resources cannot be solved by timid, incremental strategies. It takes bold, strong leadership supported by the advocacy of influencers and thought leaders.

The newspaper's editorial board might get rave reviews for its attack on Sunbreak Ranch from those who advocate for the "rights" of the homeless community, but it fails miserably to positively influence the conflation of issues San Diego finds itself buried in at the present time. The failure to enforce quality of life laws is not compassion. It is complacency.

If San Diego wants to be great, we must act with bold vision and outside-the-box thinking. We know that creating wraparound services for the homeless community is the best approach. We know that creating real community for those struggling with

addiction and mental health issues will give them pathways to healing. We know the vast majority of the homeless have unmitigated childhood trauma issues.

And yet, we continue to think that tents, sleeping bags, and feeding lines are somehow the simple, short-term answer to the complexity of the homeless problem. Sunbreak would become that village. It would become a community of hope. And if it was done right and fully funded, it would achieve all that we know is needed.

Would the homeless want to be at Sunbreak Ranch? Of course they would. If panhandling laws were enforced, if they could not store their belongings all over the sidewalk and on the overpasses of downtown, and if quality-of-life crimes actually had consequences, Sunbreak Ranch would become its own draw for those who really wanted to get off the streets and into a safe, secure environment with mental health assistance, job training, and tangible resources and support.

Downtown San Diego was never intended to house thousands of homeless people. No great leader in the history of San Diego has ever advocated for downtown to be the caring village, mental health facility, drug treatment location of choice, and beacon of hope we need for the homeless population.

Why doesn't the Union-Tribune's editorial board understand that? Everyone else that cares about San Diego does.

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