



## City Council Agenda Report

### Agenda Item 11.

**DATE:** June 27, 2023  
**TO:** Honorable Mayor and City Councilmembers  
**FROM:** Graham Mitchell, City Manager  
**SUBJECT:** Summary of Town Hall Meetings Focusing on Homelessness

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#### RECOMMENDATION:

That the City Council receives and discusses the findings of the Homeless Town Hall Meetings.

#### BACKGROUND:

The purpose of this agenda item is to present a report on the findings from the four town hall meetings held in April and May 2023. This report serves as a precursor to the semi-annual homeless program report scheduled for either July 11th or 25th. The information collected in this report will aid the City Council in considering any necessary changes to the current programs being administered by the City.

#### **Overview**

On April 4th, April 15th, April 26th, and May 4th, the City Council held four town hall meetings across the city. These town halls had four primary objectives. Firstly, they provided an opportunity to share the City's efforts in addressing homelessness and shed light on the challenges faced. Secondly, they encouraged community members to actively participate in developing potential solutions through facilitated small group discussions. Thirdly, community members were given the chance to ask questions to the City Council and staff. Lastly, the town halls aimed to gauge whether the existing programs aligned with the community's expectations.

The town halls garnered a commendable level of attendance, averaging 30 participants per town hall. Staff estimates that approximately 15 to 20 percent of attendees were individuals who had attended more than one session. According to the survey conducted, 78 percent of attendees were residents of El Cajon.

#### **Information Shared**

A portion of the town halls involved presentations by the city manager, assistant city manager, police chief, and housing manager. These presentations provided a brief overview of the City's current programs, highlighted successful initiatives in El Cajon, discussed the limitations imposed by state law and local jail policies, and presented relevant data. The purpose of these presentations was to educate attendees and lay the groundwork for the subsequent small group discussions.

To assess the effectiveness of the presentations, staff administered surveys to measure attendees' understanding of the City's programs. Surveys were distributed both before the town

halls began and at the conclusion of each session. The average score for the question "How well is El Cajon addressing homelessness on a scale of 1 to 10?" increased from 5.78 before the meeting to 7.06 at the end—a notable 22 percent improvement.

### ***Ideas Gathered***

During the town halls, attendees were divided into smaller groups and prompted to brainstorm on various questions. At the end of the discussion period, the outcomes of these discussions were shared with the larger group and the responses were documented on large notepads. Throughout the series of town halls, the questions evolved to build upon previous discussions. The following are the questions asked at different town halls, along with the prevalent answers:

#### *Ideas the City should consider?*

- More shelter options, including safe parking, camping sites, and a day center (all with wrap-around services),
- Encourage more housing development,
- Increase outreach efforts,
- Ban public camping and sleeping in vehicles, and
- Focus on substance addiction and mental health with detox facility and incentives.

#### *Why does the homeless problem grow, despite all the effort?*

- Limited shelter options in the region,
- Lack of housing and increasing cost of living,
- Section 8 waitlist,
- Not addressing the root problems of mental illness and drug addiction,
- Permissive drug laws, and
- Early release from prison with no support or safety net.

#### *What can we do for those refusing help?*

- Continue to build a relationship with homeless individuals / don't give up,
- Reduce barriers to shelter with a focus on keeping families together,
- Cut off financial support for those refusing help, and
- Address drug addiction.

#### *How would you prioritize homeless-related programs?*

1. Mental health/substance abuse facilities,
  2. Permanent housing,
  3. Day center,
  4. Safe parking/camping area, and
  5. Another emergency shelter.
- Other: Storage, More Enforcement, and More Outreach.

#### *What does "success" look like/how do we measure "success"?*

- Regional parity (in terms of impact and participation),
- Neighborhoods feel safe and look clean,
- See less homeless on the streets, and
- Programs that balance competing interests.

*What is the one thing the City should do, do more of, or do less of, to meet the City's needs regarding homelessness?*

- Break up illegal encampments,
- Outreach with wrap-around service providers,
- Ensure accountability in how homeless program funds are spent,
- Less blaming,
- Tailored programs for specific needs, and
- Share success stories.

*[Asked of service providers] What is the one thing the City does not offer or needs more of, how do we fund it, and how can service agencies help secure funding?*

The service provider focus group identified the need for more housing as the number one priority. This group suggested that the housing be permanent, including supportive services, and that the City consider post-World War II tiny homes (single-story homes usually under 1,000 square feet of living area). The group suggested that the City explore state and federal funding, but did not provide specifics. Further, the focus group did not develop a plan of how the service provider industry could help secure funding.

### ***Right Track***

One purpose of the town halls was to determine if the programs currently being offered are the types of programs being demanded by residents and other stakeholders in the community. The following are the before and after scores determined through the participant surveys that help measure a few critical items:

Question	Before	After
How significant is the issue of homelessness to you?	9.2	9.3
How important is it that the City help homeless individuals find permanent housing?	8.3	8.8
How important is it that the City clean-up encampments and not allow public camping?	8.1	7.0

As was stated at the town halls, the City's primary focus is securing permanent housing for individuals experiencing homelessness. This strategy was confirmed to be the appropriate approach by those attending the town halls. Also, staff was taken aback by the survey results which indicated that cleaning up encampments was not as high of a priority as anticipated. Considering the community survey conducted in August 2022, the volume of phone calls, and the requests received through email and the My El Cajon mobile phone app, staff acknowledges that the collective opinion of the attendees does not necessarily align with that of the average El Cajon resident.

In addition to the primary focus on developing permanent housing (which falls outside the typical scope of cities), one prominent theme that emerged from the town halls was the need for programs specifically targeting mental illness and substance abuse and addiction. In California, it is the counties that receive state funding for these types of programs. Staff recommends that the City, along with other East County cities, collaborate with the County of San Diego to establish a pilot program that addresses mental illness and substance addiction within the homeless population.

As previously mentioned, the semi-annual homeless program report will be presented to the City Council on either July 11th or 25th, providing an opportune moment to reassess the current course of action based on the findings of the town halls. As a reminder, staff has sent over one hundred invitations to service clubs, faith-based organizations, and school/parent organizations offering to provide similar town hall presentations and solicit additional information from the community.

#### CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT:

This is an informational item being considered by the City Council. Therefore, it is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) because it is not a “project” under Section 15378(b)(5) of CEQA Guidelines. It is an organizational or administrative activity of government that will not result in a direct or indirect physical change in the environment.

Prepared By: Graham Mitchell, City Manager

Reviewed By: N/A

Approved By: N/A

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