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A new hope for the homeless -- Shelter set to break ground soon, construction to start this winter

By Brad Stanhope



Mission Solano Executive Director Ron Marlette is excited about the upcoming groundbreaking for the new facility. (Photo by Gary Goldsmith)

FAIRFIELD - At a 3.5-acre lot not far from Highway 12, Ron Marlette sees a vision coming true: The Mission Solano Bridge to Life Center is close to groundbreaking.

"Hopefully at this time next year, phase one will go through," said Marlette, Mission Solano's executive director. "But I've learned the last couple of years that everything has to fall into place. We could realistically have it built within a couple of years."

Mission Solano took possession of the land on Beck Avenue - owned by Sheldon Oil - Sept. 30, capping a year-long negotiation for a 95-year

lease. For the first 55 years, the city of Fairfield will lease the land, then Mission Solano will take over the lease.

Mission Solano is Solano County's largest homeless shelter program, founded in 1998. It serves about 100,000 meals a year and houses 50 people per night at area churches in its unusual "nomadic sheltering" program.

The organization operates daily out of its Travis Boulevard headquarters, where it distributes food and clothing and offers counseling and job training. In addition, Mission Solano operates two thrift stores, a used car lot, an online book store and the Super Coups direct-mail program. The Bridge to Life Center is a \$9 million project that includes three phases to result in a 154-bed shelter. The first phase - which will begin construction sometime this winter - includes a women's and children's center with housing for 70 people and a main dining hall with facilities for 128 people. Subsequent phases will build a day care center, housing for 48 families, an education center with classrooms and a men's housing area.

Its location on the outskirts of town - a mile from homes - allowed the group to finally succeed in efforts to build a shelter after three years of difficulties with neighbors at the proposed sites. Now, construction companies are ready to go, Marlette said.

"We're excited about the builders," Marlette said. "We had a meeting with all of them and they came together and looked at the architect's drawings. They were talking about improvements. It's finally coming to reality and it's going to be built. Thousands of people are going to be restored."

Of the \$9 million budget - which is \$1.3 million more than the original estimate - much of it comes from major donations. HomeAid of Northern California, the charitable arm of the Home Builders Association, promised half the building costs and Mission Solano received a \$1 million donation from Federal Home Loan Bank of San Francisco earlier this year. Other builders have given significant sums, leaving the final piece from the local community in a public campaign

that will likely start in the spring, after construction begins.

Mission Solano has brought on several heavy hitters to help with the campaign, including former Fairfield mayor Gary Falati, who is serving as the honorary chair.

"We're making huge progress," Marlette said of the profile of Mission Solano. "It's exciting to see not only awareness, but the amount of it from across all areas of the community - business, government, the faith community. We've got to work together."

As the group stands on the brink of finally building its facility, Marlette is pleased with the progress of his organization. At a recent forum of City Council candidates, for instance, all participants mentioned Mission Solano while discussing the area's homeless population.

"That was one of my first goals. When I put together the first business plan for Mission Solano, the goal was to be Solano County's leading nonprofit for homelessness," he said.

"It's exciting to see that happen - people are seeing that we're not going away - we need to push the vision to see people restored. We want to break the cycle of homelessness. This isn't Ron Marlette's Mission Solano or the board's Mission Solano. This is the community's Mission Solano."

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RADIO-A-THON

Mission Solano will hold a "radio-a-thon" Thursday at the Hilton Garden Inn, with help from radio station KUIK and volunteers working phone banks. The goal is to raise \$25,000 in one day. To volunteer, call Jennifer Simmons at 399-3801.