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Mission Solano breaks ground for new shelter

By Brad Stanhope

FAIRFIELD - The chairman of Mission Solano's board saw a purpose in the wintry weather Thursday.

"If we really want a reason why this is necessary, we brought a little rain," said Tim LeFever, referring to homeless people left in the downpours.

As rain peppered a makeshift tent across Beck Avenue from the area where construction will soon begin on Mission Solano's "Bridge to Life Center," about 100 politicians, business people, community and religious leaders gathered to commemorate the groundbreaking on the \$4.7 million first phase of the project.

Mission Solano, the county's largest homeless shelter, plans a three-phase project that will result in a 154-bed shelter, day-care center, education units and a dining hall on a 3-acre site near Cordelia Road. The event Thursday was a celebration of the progress for Mission Solano since its founding in 1998, as well as a preview of what is to come - including more fund-raising for the next phases.

The mission, in conjunction with the city of Fairfield, has a 95-year lease on the property, which is owned by Sheldon Oil. The money is already raised for the first phase - which will include a women's and children's center as well as the dining hall.

"It's fully funded - \$4.7 million," said campaign chairman Gary Falati, a member of the Fairfield-Suisun School Board and former Fairfield mayor. "That's a major, major accomplishment."

He was one of about a dozen speakers, including representatives from the governments of Fairfield, Suisun City, Vacaville and Solano County. There were also several representatives from the building industry, including HomeAid of Northern California, the charitable arm of the Homebuilders Association, which has pledged at least half the \$9 million cost to build the center.

Suisun City Mayor Jim Spering acknowledged the county long "ignored" the homeless population and said Mission Solano "finally has given synergy to address this problem. I think the solution is within our grasp."

Patrick Dutuerte, Solano County's director of health and social services, talked about meeting Mission Solano Executive Director Ron Marlette four years ago and their shared vision of helping those in need. He pledged the county would work with the mission as a partner.

Vacaville Councilman Steve Hardy added Mission Solano "would not say no and would not go away. That's why we're here today."

LeFever and others praised the local churches that opened their doors to 50 homeless people per night on a rotating basis since 1998. Marlette said the nomadic sheltering program won't stop when the center opens because there are too many people who in need - an estimated 4,500 per night in the county, according to a Solano County task force.

"We're going to continue to fight for the homeless and the needy in our community," he said.

Construction on the first phase is expected to start this winter and Marlette has said he hopes it will be finished within a year. Mission Solano continues to operate out of its current headquarters on Travis Boulevard.

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