

FAIRFIELD

Solano breaks ground on homeless center

Kevin Fagan, Chronicle Staff Writer
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Leaders from throughout Solano County stood in a huge tent Thursday with a rainstorm pounding overhead and proclaimed that the future for ending homelessness in their communities lay across the street in a muddy field.

That's where a few water pipes and a billboard with a schematic drawing poked up through the weeds. It doesn't look like much now, organizers said, but within three years that muddy field will be turned into the \$9 million homeless housing and counseling center pictured on the billboard -- the most ambitious such project ever undertaken in Solano.



Chronicle / Brant Ward

The Travis Air Force Base Honor Guard leads ceremony participants in the Pledge of Allegiance. Chronicle photo by Brant Ward



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Patrick Verquitas, 56, who says he's been homeless off and on in Solano County since 1964, wants to live at the new center. Chronicle photo by Brant Ward

For a county that faces possibly the most acute homeless problem with the fewest resources in the Bay Area, that transformation can't come too soon, the community leaders and homeless alike agreed.

"For many years, Solano County has completely ignored the homeless problem," Suisun City Mayor Jim Sperling said as the crowd of 200 murmured agreement. "It wasn't for a lack of caring, but there hasn't been a central organization that could deal with this problem. Until now."

That organization is Mission Solano, which since 1998 has run the bigger of only two shelters in the county, a 50-bed complex in Fairfield.

Mission Executive Director Ron Marlette has been pushing to expand his operation for years -- and Thursday he was getting his wish with the groundbreaking ceremony for his Bridge to Life Center, which when completed in 2008 will offer 154 units of housing for families, women and men.

The center, located on 3.5 acres at Beck Avenue and Cordelia Road, will also have a residential drug treatment facility, a chapel, a day care center, and drop-in counseling

services to help homeless people with job, psychological or other difficulties. Residents will get on-site counseling and be able to stay for 18 months while they locate more permanent housing.

Organizers believe they will be able to cycle thousands of homeless people off the street through the center, since many of Solano's homeless already work at odd jobs and are less severely troubled than in cities such as San Francisco.

The biggest such operation for the homeless before this in Solano was a drop-in center in Fairfield, the county seat, which closed four years ago after neighbors complained about loiterers. Since then, the county's 4,000 mostly rural homeless people have struggled with no new services, often living on the edges of towns in bushes and gullies.

A recent study by the Association of Bay Area Governments showed that Solano received less federal and state homeless-aid funding per capita than anywhere in the Bay Area. Bridge to Life is being paid for by city, county and private money, most notably a grant from the charity Home Aid of Northern California.

"It's been a struggle to get this sort of effort going, but the folks at Mission Solano really impressed us, persuaded us to pitch in with funding," said Herm Rowland Sr., patriarch of the family that owns Jelly Belly Candy Co. in Fairfield. "And make no mistake, when it came to getting this off the ground, Ron (Marlette) was the shaker-baker, man. He's been where the homeless are. He understands them. He is phenomenal."

Marlette, a former homeless drug addict who shook his troubles 21 years ago, seemed nearly giddy with excitement as he thanked the crowd. But then, that is his usual mode. With his booming laugh and energetic persona, Marlette pushed every political, business and religious leader of note from Vallejo to Fairfield into supporting his building project.

"This gathering is incredible," said Marlette, awaiting his turn on the podium. "I mean look -- they're all here in the pouring rain, putting their money and hearts into this.

"They're counting on us to help solve this crisis. And we will."

A mile away at a homeless encampment, dubbed The Colony and set around a beaver pond, several people sat miserably in shelters of tarps and tents while those at the groundbreaking ceremony munched hors d'oeuvres.

"It looks like something out of Rome, so big and so beautiful," 56-year-old Patrick Verquitas marveled, poring over an artist's rendering of Bridge to Life. "I've never seen anything like this, and I've been homeless off and on in this county since 1964.

"I want to live there."

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