

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors
Comments to Agenda Item 6B

Chair Gjerde and Honorable Members of the Board,

Agenda Item 6B as currently envisioned appears to run directly counter to recommendations previously approved by the Board of Supervisors.

Accordingly, I recommend the scope of the item be broadened to authorize the ad hoc committee to develop a specific plan regarding a potential Homeless Trash Clean-up Program and Strategies for Preventing Establishment of Homeless Encampments, particularly in wetland and riparian areas.

In March 2019 Dr. Robert Marbut submitted a final report of his assessment of homelessness in Mendocino County and recommended strategic action steps. The Marbut Report was adopted in concept by the Board of Supervisors, the Ukiah City Council and the Fort Bragg City Council. The Strategic Plan to Address Homelessness in Mendocino County, which builds on Dr. Marbut's recommendations, was adopted by the Board of Supervisors on August 18, 2020.

I believe the reason the Board did not move forward with a homeless trash program in 2019 was not because of lack of interest but because doing so would be in conflict with the Marbut Report recommendations. As noted in recommendation #20 of the Marbut Report:

"Overall, encampments are unsafe, unhealthy and unsuitable for habitation by the individuals living within them. [Encampments]...pose serious environmental contamination issues, disease transmission concerns, vector control risks and potential fire hazards."

"In addition to fire hazards and vector control issues, encampments are negatively threatening the environment in a variety of ways including threatening to contaminate waterways."

The Marbut Report recommendations focus on ways to assist individuals in "graduating" from homelessness instead of perpetuating homelessness. Enabling encampments reduces the incentive to seek or accept help or exercise other available options. Dr. Marbut noted that individuals who are not housed but who have other options do not meet the HUD definition of homelessness.

Allowing encampments to remain entrenched is detrimental to the individuals residing in them, the environment and the community. This has been validated repeatedly based on experience with encampments in the greater Ukiah area. When an encampment is allowed to remain, word soon spreads and the encampment grows, along with the amount of trash generated, negative community impacts and damage to the environment. A case in point is the established encampment adjacent to the City of Ukiah ballfields off River Street along the north bank of Orr Creek. Instead of being an amenity to the adjacent ballfields it's an area to avoid that is having a significant impact on the environment.

Although trash service may seem to address an immediate problem, if nothing is done to remove the encampment, when winter comes a large volume of material is swept down stream. A trash service program does little or nothing to address this. Dr. Marbut noted the large volume of material that accumulates in homeless encampments. When the residents of the encampment leave in response to winter rains or high water the greatest part of what they have accumulated is left behind.

I encourage the Board to broaden the scope of this item so that it isn't just about cleaning up trash, but it's also about cleaning up encampments. In support of a zero tolerance approach to encampments, Dr. Marbut recommends: *"Proactive efforts need to occur to locate encampments, and then engage the individuals living in encampments and cleanup the associated rubbish."*

Using a trash service program to engage individuals living in homeless encampments may have merit if it is done with the purpose of engagement in support of the Strategic Plan to Address Homelessness in Mendocino County. The goal ought to be reducing homelessness, not enabling it.

Thank you for your consideration.

John McCowen