

LOCAL NEWS

## Marin awarded \$18M to assist homeless campers, workers



Inhabited vehicles line Binford Road along the Rush Creek Marsh in Novato, Calif., on Monday, Jan. 9, 2023. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)



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The state will provide another \$18 million to help homeless people in Marin move from camps into housing.

The announcement came just days before the U.S. Supreme Court began hearing arguments in a case that might determine how much authority local governments have to shut down camps on public property and as the county approaches a funding cliff for recently housed homeless people.

The state grants include \$8.67 million to maintain temporary housing and help underwrite permanent housing for about 60 Latino service and agricultural workers near Bolinas; \$5.99 million to resolve the largest municipal camp in Marin County, 65 to 70 people living in the Mahon Creek Path area of San Rafael; and \$3.72 million to fund the continuing effort to address a large group of vehicle inhabitants along Binford Road in unincorporated Novato.

With this third round of grants from its Encampment Resolution Fund, the state has given out \$907 million to address people living in camps. In the two previous rounds of funding, San Rafael received \$772,960, while Novato got about \$1.4 million to address camps at Lee Gerner Park and Hamilton Marsh.

The new Binford Road grant went to Marin County, which is also partnering with San Rafael on the Mahon Creek Path grant and the Bolinas Community Land Trust on the grant for the Latino farmworkers.

“The championship of Sen. Mike McGuire has been essential to our success in coming as far as we have,” said Annie O’Connor, executive director of the Bolinas Community Land Trust.

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McGuire, Marin's representative in the state Senate, is the president pro tempore of the chamber.

The land trust raised about \$3.7 million in grants and donations to move some 60 Latino agricultural and service workers, who had been living in substandard conditions for years, into 27 leased recreational vehicles last year.

The land trust located the trailers on a 20-acre parcel at 130 Mesa Road that it already owned, but had to pay for the construction of a new mound septic system at the site. It still has a \$300,000 outstanding loan to repay associated with the project. Marin County and the Marin Community Foundation each have contributed \$622,000 to the effort.

O'Connor said about \$3.2 million of the new \$8.67 million grant will go toward developing permanent housing for the people living in the recreational vehicles. Money is needed to pay for land, design consultants and site preparation. The land trust is partnering with Habitat for Humanity Greater San Francisco on that effort.

The rest of the money will be used for a variety of purposes. The land trust intends to purchase the recreational vehicles, which it currently pays \$50,000 per month to lease. The grant will also help underwrite other operating costs.

"The grant will allow us to subsidize the cost of hiring a full-time repair and maintenance professional, and an on-site property manager," O'Connor said, "and to subsidize individuals who are extremely low income."

The residents living in the RVs are required to pay no more than 30% of what they earn.

In August 2023, after receiving a \$1.6 million Encampment Resolution Fund grant, county staff announced a three-year plan to resolve the Binford Road camp. At the time, the county estimated 80 to 90 people were living in the camp using more than 100 vehicles.

Gary Naja-Riese, a county homelessness official, said there are about 91 people living along Binford Road in about 93 vehicles.

"There have been new arrivals since August," Naja-Riese said.

Naja-Riese said the numbers are down since December, when it was estimated that there were 101 campers and 150 vehicles on Binford Road. Twenty-five people from the camp have been housed since August.

In December, in an effort to remove more vehicles from the road, county supervisors approved using \$100,000 in county general fund money to fund a vehicle buyback program. Since then, eight RVs and one trailer have been purchased at a cost of \$40,900.

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Naja-Riese said the funds also will be used to improve the infrastructure of the camp and to provide direct services to people living there, such as transportation and money for temporary motel stays.

In its application for the \$5.99 million grant it received, San Rafael committed to placing at least 46 Mahon Creek Path campers in permanent housing by June 30, 2027, and having the remainder of the people living there on their way to permanent housing by then.

The city plans to use the money to hire three housing-based case managers and one bilingual outreach worker. The funds will also be used to provide interim housing for some campers by paying for motel rooms or buying tiny homes.

San Rafael was sued by 10 homeless people after the City Council passed an ordinance limiting the size and location of large camps. The ordinance, recently amended with relaxed rules, regulates the public space campsites can occupy. The suit is working its way through the courts.

San Rafael's legal predicament was referred to on Monday when the U.S. Supreme Court heard oral arguments in the Johnson v. Grants Pass case. The city of Grants Pass, Oregon, was sued after it passed an ordinance banning camping, even though the only homeless beds available there were provided by a Christian organization that required adherence to its rules.



Cheyne Biskupski cleans an engine outside his tent along the Mahon Creek Path in San Rafael, Calif., on Friday, Sept. 8, 2023. He is one of several homeless people living in the camp. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)

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Martin v. Boise, a federal case decided by the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in 2018, dramatically changed the law governing how cities can regulate camping by the unsheltered on public property. The decision mandates that cities may prohibit public camping only if they can establish that there is available shelter space for all homeless people.

Theane Evangelis, arguing on behalf of Grants Pass, said, “Federal courts are now deciding everything from the exact size of campsites in San Rafael to the adequacy of empty beds at specific shelters, like the Gospel Rescue Mission in Grants Pass, and cities are struggling to apply arbitrary, shifting standards in the field.”

Evangelis noted that the courts have told San Rafael that 200 feet between camps is too much, “and that 100 feet was the maximum under the Eighth Amendment.”

San Rafael City Attorney Rob Epstein said, “I think what the attorney is trying to say is that the problem with the Martin decision is that federal courts in the Ninth Circuit have really gone too far in the way that they are attempting to regulate in this area.”

It is unclear how a ruling in favor of Grants Pass would affect Marin. During a budget workshop in March, Supervisor Eric Lucan said that as far as Binford Road goes, “I don’t see our strategy changing at all regardless of what happens with the Grants Pass decision. It’s pretty clear that that is not a solution to homelessness.”

As Marin jurisdictions attempt to resolve camps by placing more homeless people in permanent housing, they also face increasing costs for providing mandated ongoing supportive services, which are provided by housing-based case managers.

Naja-Riese said the county spent \$1.2 million on housing-based case management in both of the last two fiscal years. The Encampment Resolution Fund and other state grants often foot this cost initially, but when the grant funds are spent the county bears responsibility for providing ongoing funding.

Naja-Riese said, “Beginning at the end of this fiscal year and through the end of the next two fiscal years, we stand to lose basically almost all of our housing-based case management grant funding.”

During a March budget workshop, Carrie Sager, a homelessness program coordinator for the county, showed supervisors a chart that illustrated the county’s yearly costs for providing supportive services to people housed in Project Homekey sites at 3301 Kerner Blvd. in San Rafael and 1251 S. Eliseo Drive in Greenbrae. The chart showed the costs rising from \$461,143 in fiscal 2024 to \$2.3 million by fiscal 2028.

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