Opinion: Homelessness becomes a political issue

By Joe Mathews

How did homelessness suddenly become such a hot issue across California? There are many reasons, few of which have anything to do with homeless people.

Those reasons—economic anxiety, budget surpluses, tax schemes, housing prices, prison reform, urban development and politics—have combined to create today's "homeless moment."



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For decades, homelessness has been a civic obsession in the Bay Area, with its progressive politics and generous homeless services. Now that homelessness hubbub is spreading statewide. To the surprise of many at the state Capitol, a $2 billion bond to pay for housing for the mentally ill homeless became a central focus of this month's budget negotiations. Around the state, law enforcement officials have stirred the pot by claiming that measures to reduce the California prison population exacerbate homelessness.

In Los Angeles, which has the nation's second largest homeless population, a homeless emergency has been declared, and the biggest political fights in town are over city and county plans to ramp up spending on homeless services. In San Diego, with America's fourth largest homeless population, a leading

city councilman called for ending all homelessness by next year, a promise overshadowed by the city's installation of jagged rocks under a freeway to dislodge homeless encampments before July's baseball all-star game.

In Fresno, Mayor Ashley Swearengin just announced a plan to end homelessness in three years. In Sacramento, homelessness was a leading issue in this month's mayoral election. Orange County may appoint a "homeless czar."

Given this drama, you might expect homeless populations to be rapidly rising. But homeless counts (the accuracy of which is always debated) suggest homeless populations are flat, or in decline, in many California cities. So why the sudden urgency? The homeless are now more visible to the rich people who drive civic conversation. New restaurants and housing have brought wealthy folks into central-city neighborhoods and old industrial areas that once were havens for the homeless.

At the same time, anxiety about housing has never run deeper. The housing crisis of the previous decade cost many Californians their homes. California's total failure to build sufficient housing of all types has led to sky-high prices in this decade. For many, sleeping on the street no longer seems such a distant prospect.

Polls reflect this fear, and politicians have seized on it. In an extraordinary public letter late last year, then-Santa Cruz Mayor Don Lane (now a councilman) urged bold experiments with the problem—and criticized his own previous inaction. "I am as responsible as anyone in this community for our failure to address our lack of shelter and our over-reliance on law enforcement and the criminal justice system to manage homelessness," he wrote. "I have been a direct participant in many of my city's decisions on homelessness. I have failed to adequately answer many of the questions I am posing."

Such self-criticism is easier when money is on the way. The

federal government has stepped up funding for homeless veterans. The state has approved a plan to borrow $2 billion from a state fund for mental health services (funded by a tax on millionaires) to pay for housing for the mentally ill homeless.

This homeless moment has also created opportunities for clever political money grabs. Some LA County supervisors have asked the state to permit them to impose their own millionaire's tax to pay for more homeless programs. That money would free up other funds for other purposes—which is all the more reason to decree a homelessness crisis.

To be fair, much of this money will be spent on a strategy that has shown some success—providing permanent supportive housing for the homeless. But such housing is no panacea for a problem this complex. And today's windfall for homeless services is unlikely, in California's volatile budget system, to last. Even if it did, the disparate nature of the funding—incentives, borrowing matching grants—isn't efficient or sufficient to create the capacity to cover California's homeless populations.

In his acclaimed new book "Evicted", Harvard Professor Matthew Desmond argues that ending homelessness requires a much bolder stroke: establishing "universal housing" as a right, like the well-established right to public education.

Under Desmond's proposal, the government would issue housing vouchers to families below a certain income threshold so that they pay no more than 30 percent of their income on housing. Such rental assistance has a strong track record in some European countries, which don't suffer from American-style homelessness. In the U.S., universal housing via vouchers would cost $60 billion, Desmond estimates—a fraction of the hundreds of billions spent subsidizing the housing of wealthier people via programs like the mortgage-interest tax deduction.

Universal housing is just the sort of idea that California should try—if our homeless moment is really about ending homelessness.

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