

Update: Sacramento measure calling for more homeless sweeps leads in early returns

By Theresa Clift

Updated November 08, 2022 11:45 PM

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<https://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/election/local-election/article268250857.html>

A member of a election-night gathering in opposition to Sacramento's Measure O, which would allow Sacramento officials to clear homeless tents more often, shares her objections to the measure on Nov. 8, 2022. The measure was leading in early returns. By Renée C, Byer

A Sacramento ballot measure that would make it easier for the city to clear homeless camps from public property is leading in early election returns, with 56.3% of the votes counted so far supporting Measure O.

The measure grew out of frustration in Sacramento's business community with the city's homelessness crisis.

"Measure O brings compassion for the unhoused and safety and security for our businesses and residents," said Amanda Blackwood, President and CEO of the Sacramento Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce. "The business community and all Sacramentans have heard enough excuses. Measure O forces the city to do their job."

Since 2018, a federal court ruling has restricted local government's power to clear homeless camps on public property. During the same years, Sacramento County's homeless population surged so dramatically that it's now greater than San Francisco's.

Sacramento Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Sacramento Region Business Association led a push to put a version of the measure on the ballot as an initiative. The campaign, which included the police officers union, wanted to nudge the city to open more shelters and make it easier to clear more encampments from public spaces.

The City Council in April voted 7-2 to place the measure on the ballot, ending the signature-gathering campaign. Worried it would bankrupt the city, the council modified the measure language, decreasing the amount of shelter space the city would be obligated to provide.

Council members in August amended the measure again in a 7-2 vote, stipulating that it would only take effect if the city has a budget surplus, and only if the city and Sacramento County agree to a binding pact requiring the county to increase homeless services. The agreement, which would require approval from the City Council and the Board of Supervisors, has not yet been finalized or released to the public.

"Moving people around in circles is not homeless services," Councilwoman Angelique Ashby said at the time. "We need mental health, we need child services, we need domestic violence ... we need resources. That means we need the county."

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Business leaders have said the measure, which would also give residents a new legal mechanism to complain about camps, would push local leaders to finally get thousands of people indoors. The city and county fund about 2,300 shelter beds and spaces, but roughly 7,000 more are still needed, a recent report found.

“Sacramento will become the first city where it’ll be illegal to live in public spaces,” Daniel Conway, who led the effort for the measure, said during an April press conference at Golden 1 Center. “Sacramento doesn’t continue to have to be the place that allows people to live and die on our streets every day.”

Homeless activists strongly oppose the measure because its language would allow police to break up camps of four unrelated people in public spaces, even without offering shelter or housing. Many homeless people, especially women, live in close-knit groups for safety.

They also oppose it because they say it would cost the city millions to respond to the new complaints. City Councilwoman Katie Valenzuela, the ACLU, Sacramento Area Congregations Together and the Sacramento Homeless Union opposed the measure.

“At best, Measure O is poorly thought out and too vague to be effective- at worst, it’s needlessly punitive and cruel to those who need our help the most,” Valenzuela posted on Twitter Tuesday. “Let’s get to work implementing real solutions instead.”

This story was originally published November 8, 2022 8:17 PM.