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## San Rafael's rapid decisions are undermining public trust

San Rafael's handling of the proposal for a homeless shelter at 350 Merrydale Road has left many residents feeling blindsided and excluded from decisions that directly affect our neighborhoods.

The question is not whether city officials should address homelessness — it must. It's whether major public decisions are being made with the transparency and timing that residents deserve.

For months, officials negotiated in closed session to purchase the property. Although the law allows confidential discussion of price and terms, the project's intended use as a 65-cabin interim shelter was not disclosed until the transaction was nearly complete. Residents who live on the surrounding properties first learned of the proposal when Mayor Kate Colin, along with city, county and state officials, unveiled the vision for the site at a seemingly high-profile press conference on Oct. 15 that the public was apparently not invited to attend.

At that event, Colin stated, "there will be an interim shelter project here on this site." She seemingly presented the plan as a finished decision before any public announcement or community discussion. She further emphasized that the county administrator and city manager had "worked very, very hard behind the scenes to have this day brought forward." For many nearby residents, the suddenness of the announcement triggered a sense of alarm, as we tried to understand what the project would mean for our neighborhoods.

At the City Council meeting Nov. 17, five interrelated actions were approved in rapid succession, moving the project forward at dizzying speed: a shelter crisis declaration was approved, as was an emergency ordinance (and a nearly identical nonemergency ordinance); an \$8 million county grant was accepted; and a purchase and sale agreement approved. These decisions came with more than 500 pages of materials and, by all indications, they weren't released until 72 hours before the meeting. With just two minutes allotted per speaker, many residents felt overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of what we were expected to comment on in such a short time.

"I will 100% own that I would redo the approach, and my excitement of sharing a vision, a possibility for what we could be doing here in San Rafael," Colin said at a recent council meeting. "I understand it was received as 'blindsided.' I own that.

"In my exuberance and my belief that this vision could be transformative for San Rafael and for the state of California, I was exuberant, and I was insensitive. I own that, and I apologize, and I have learned."

Many of us appreciated the candor, yet the project continued on its original timeline: Escrow closed, the deed was recorded and planning moved ahead toward a spring opening. Residents are now being invited to discuss site details, policies and volunteer opportunities, all important conversations, but occurring after the foundational decisions were made.

I think the drawing by IJ political cartoonist George Russell published Nov. 30 starkly captured the sentiment. A train labeled "City of San Rafael" pushed the "Tiny Home Village Plan" into a tunnel marked "Merrydale Residents." Cartoons are often humorous by exaggeration, but this one resonated because it reflected how many of us felt.

Our "island neighborhood" is boxed in by Highway 101, train tracks and North San Pedro Road. Many here feel long overlooked. I am 76 years old. I walk with a cane. I have counted more than two dozen tripping hazards on a single stretch of Merrydale Road. Now city officials have placed an entire "village" at the most vulnerable end of that corridor.

This experience is not unique to Merrydale. In speaking with some San Rafael residents in other neighborhoods, I heard similar concerns about inclusion and timing. These patterns matter, because trust is built not only on outcomes

but on process.

One constructive outcome of these actions is that they have motivated our neighborhoods to become more organized and engaged. We have joined the Federation of San Rafael Neighborhoods and intend to participate actively at every opportunity. Our goal is not to obstruct solutions but to ensure residents are meaningfully included in shaping them.

The core issue is not homelessness or housing, It is our basic right to know. True transparency begins early, when the public still has the opportunity to understand, ask questions and participate before decisions are finalized. San Rafael can and should meet that standard. Our neighborhoods intend to keep showing up until it does.

*Ken Dickinson, a San Rafael resident who lives near 350 Merrydale Road, is a member of the Marin Citizens for Solutions Not Secrecy group.*