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Director's layoff prompts Safe Ground Sacramento board departures

Quest to build permanent homeless village reaches a 'hump of uncertainty'

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The organization that's pursuing a 75-cabin village for Sacramento's most chronically homeless is in the midst of a **sweeping leadership shuffle**.

Safe Ground Sacramento laid off executive director Steve Watters last month, SN&R has confirmed.

Watters said he was notified verbally of the decision shortly after he updated his board of directors about his fundraising efforts. "The response was the layoff," he said. "To be honest, **no real reason** was given, nor was it in writing."

His dismissal sparked the departures of nearly half of the seven-member executive board: Bob Erlenbusch, Anthony "Amani" Gallardo and Bill Kennedy.

The **semi-exodus** arrives less than three months after Safe Ground realized its most tangible political breakthroughs yet in its six-year quest to create a permanent homeless community. In February, the Sacramento City Council carved out \$1 million to put toward yet-to-be announced homeless-fighting strategies. Word came that Councilman Allen Warren was verbally supportive of Safe Ground's desire to build the transitional camp in his district.

It remains to be seen how Safe Ground's lineup change affects the project or a fundraising goal of roughly \$3 million. Watters said his main concern now was ensuring that it didn't. "My interest remains in seeing the project ... succeed," he said.

Noted homeless-rights attorney and Safe Ground board member Mark Merin said the board already reached out to Warren, and doesn't believe the potential partnership is in danger. "I think he wants to get over this **hump of uncertainty**," he said.

Warren's office didn't return a request for comment before print deadline.

Merin described the decision to part ways with Watters as noncontentious and said it came down to the board wanting to concentrate resources on securing land for a Safe Ground village, which didn't leave much for an **executive director's salary**. "We're focused on getting a development partner," he said. "Only if you get that is the dream realistic."

Merin didn't rule out hiring a new executive director in the future, "someone with more development experience ... someone to take us there, basically."

Merin intimated that Safe Ground was close to landing a development partner and that both Warren and Councilman Jay Schenirer had expressed tentative support for building the village in north Sacramento's **Redwood Park**.

Former board chairman Erlenbusch said Watters was making roughly \$48,000 annually after taking no salary his first year in the position. He said Watters "was getting much better at fundraising" and called him a "hard, tireless worker."

Gallardo, who is homeless, said Watters was “the **best thing to happen** to Safe Ground.” Since his departure as board vice president, Gallardo said he's working more directly with the homeless community through Safe Ground's Pilgrimage program, which came out of the **disbanded Tent City** operation in 2009.

“I personally left [the board] because it wasn't the same Safe Ground I joined in 2010,” he said. “It wasn't the same thing that I was willing to fight for anymore.”

Erlenbusch went further, saying he didn't want to be “part of the dysfunction of the current remaining board.”

Erlenbusch runs the Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness, while Kennedy, who served as the board's legal counsel, is a managing attorney at Legal Services of Northern California.

Safe Ground is one of the organizations spearheading a **three-day homeless-rights pilgrimage** on city property known as Homeward Stake Down, which begins Thursday, May 1, at 12th and C streets. The “arts and action” campout will feature workshops for homeless youth and women, civil-rights tutorials, music, poetry and art. “It's a major city event,” Merin said.