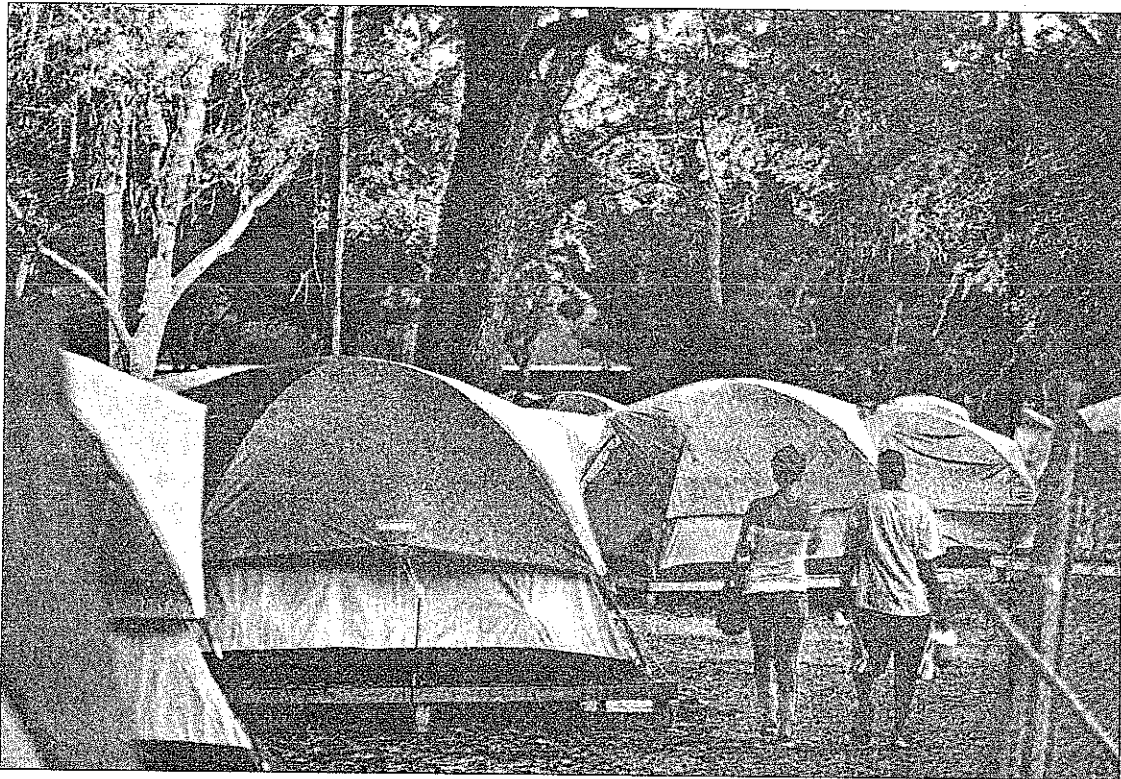


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# Tent city may stop some illegal camping



Cherie Diez, St. Petersburg Times

**Model.** Pinellas Hope, a tent city for homeless people in Pinellas County, is the model Brevard County Commission Chairman Robin Fisher wants to use in Mims.

# County park could become tent city for local homeless

## Commissioner proposes isolated area in Mims

BY DAVE BERMAN  
FLORIDA TODAY 11-25-11

An isolated county park in Mims could become the future site of a "tent city" to house some of Brevard County's homeless population.

Brevard County Commission Chairman Robin Fisher and advocates for the homeless are pushing a plan to convert a section of Hatbill Park in Mims into a tent city for people without a permanent place to live, in a plan modeled after a site in Pinellas County.

The renewed push to find a legal alternative to homeless people illegally camping on private property was triggered by a recent Titusville Police Department initiative to clear out homeless camps in the city in advance of the last shuttle launch.

George Taylor Sr., an advocate for homeless veterans, has criticized police officials for how they handled the detail, including how he said they discarded items found at the camps, such as clothing, supplies and various personal mementos. Police defended the action, saying they gave residents of the camps repeated notice that



Tim Shortt, FLORIDA TODAY

**Down the road.** Andrew Sharpe, 86, a World War II veteran who has lived down the road from Hatbill Park for about 35 years, and is OK with the proposal of a tent city.

they had to leave the camps, gave them a list of some community resources, and informed them of when their deadline was.

Fisher, whose district is in North Brevard, says there are no easy solutions, but he is looking for options.

There are thousands of people in Brevard County who are homeless. The latest organized county-wide census of homeless people, taken Jan. 27, found that 1,889 people in Brevard were sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation or in an emergency shelter, including 450 children. An additional 839 people fell into an expanded Florida Statutes definition of homelessness because they were living in a motel, camping ground, travel trailer park or

someone else's residence because of economic hardship or loss of their previous housing.

Liz Lee, director of community impact for the United Way of Brevard, said those numbers understate the true scope of the homeless problem in Brevard. Many homeless people hide, rather than be counted, either out of embarrassment or because of fear of legal repercussions. Others live in areas so isolated that people doing the census never find them.

Lee also expects the county's homeless population to increase, because of the end of the space shuttle program and the related layoffs.

"A lot more people are  
See TENT, 3A

## TENT, from 1A

unemployed for the first time in their lives and lost their homes," Lee said. This includes former space workers and people in other jobs that are tied to business from the space program and its workers.

"They are going to be the new homeless," Lee said.

Titusville City Council member Rita Pritchett said the homeless issue is "a growing problem in our area. It is something we cannot ignore."

Melbourne Police Chief Steve Mimbs said homelessness is an issue in the southern part of the county, too. While downtown Melbourne generally does not have the big-city problem of homeless people sleeping in front of storefronts, the homeless are in the area, but in somewhat more obscure locations, Mimbs said. When his department gets complaints from property owners, it warns the homeless people that they are trespassing and must leave.

## Tent city model

Fisher said he hopes that, in a small way, the tent city concept could help reduce the problem of

people illegally camping on private property, in wooded areas or under highway overpasses.

The possibility of creating a tent city for the homeless has been under study at the county level for at least three years, albeit in a low-key manner. In April 2008, two officials from the Brevard County Housing and Human Services Department, Rosa Reich and Alan Woolwich, visited a tent city in Clearwater called Pine-llas Hope. The program was started by Catholic Charities.

They later wrote a 12-page report on their trip. At the time, the tent facility averaged 250 residents. It expanded in September to include 50 efficiency units with 80 beds.

Catholic Charities Diocese of St. Petersburg Chief Operating Officer Sheila Lopez said she believes Pine-llas Hope "is helping both the homeless and the community." It serves 1,100 to 1,200 people a year, and Lopez estimates it has a success rate of about 52 percent, in finding permanent living arrangements for formerly homeless people in that area.

Fisher and Taylor want to consider a similar tent city concept, on a much smaller scale, for Hatbill Park, which is off an unpaved section of road, about 5 miles south of State Road 46. The 15-acre park now pri-

marily is used as a launch area for fishing boats and airboats.

Taylor said he believes there is progress toward starting with a tent city for about 30 homeless people, and expanding it after seeing how well it works.

"It's a matter of getting it to the county commission," Taylor said. "I think the urgency should be set from what we just experienced."

Tim Elmore, a 43-year-old homeless resident who was temporarily staying at a 14-bed Salvation Army facility for the homeless in Titusville, said he likes the idea, but added that such a program should offer job counseling, drug and alcohol counseling and psychiatric support for people who need such resources.

Kris Quadriozzi, 38, who also was staying at the Salvation Army, said one hurdle of the Hatbill Park site is the lack of transportation for people who may have to get to a job, to a store or to a medical appointment. Quadriozzi said she previously had been living in a tent in a wooded area of Merritt Island.

Taylor, who is founder and president of National Veterans Homeless Support, said his organization could offer people living in Hatbill Park rides to the nearest Space Coast Area Transit bus stop.

Among the only homeowners near Hatbill Park is Andrew Sharpe, an 86-year-old retired Kennedy Space Center firefighter, and his wife, Norma Jean, 83, who live on a 42-acre property nearby that until two years ago also had an active orange grove.

"It wouldn't bother me at all" to have the tent city at Hatbill Park, Andrew Sharpe said, as long as residents did not cause any trouble in the area. He felt it could be a good solution to help homeless people have a more stable place to live.

Both Mimbs and Titusville Assistant Police Chief John Lau say a tent city concept for the homeless is an idea worth exploring.

## Legal issues

As Taylor works on the tent city concept, he also plans to meet further with Titusville officials to seek changes in the city's current ordinances that restrict camping and panhandling, saying those measures illegally target the homeless population.

During an hourlong Titusville City Council discussion on the homeless issue, Taylor also asked city officials to investigate the police department's actions in clearing the homeless camps.

Titusville Mayor Jim Tulley said he was more interested in finding solutions to the homeless issue than rehashing the conflicting "he said/she said" accounts of what may have happened in the past.

"We generally don't air police policy in public," Tulley told Taylor during the council meeting.

Lau defended his department's actions, saying: "I don't think we did anything wrong, but we could do better."

He said the police officers on the detail dispatched to the homeless camps included military veterans, and they were sensitive to the homeless veterans affected.

Lau said the visits to shut down the camps resulted from issues of public safety. He said his department handled about 300 calls for service in the first half of 2011 related to the homeless, on issues that included shoplifting, panhandling and public urination. Among the 11 camps shut down, Lau noted, was one near South Lake Elementary School.

"We were not trying to solve the homeless problem," Lau said, but trying to protect the public. ■

R. Norman Moody and Tim Shortt contributed to this report.

Contact Berman at 321-360-1016 or dberman@floridatoday.com.