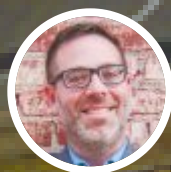


CalTrans to fund cleanup of Hwy 198 in Visalia



By *Reggie Ellis*

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State agency grants city \$500,000 to fund litter abatement program for scenic corridor to the sequoias

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VISALIA – It's been several months since homeless people were relocated off the Highway 198 corridor in Visalia but the trash from the encampments still litters the highway. Mayor Steve Nelsen said that problem should be cleared up soon after he spearheaded an effort to partner with CalTrans to clean up the highway through the city and have homeless people do some of the work.

At its Oct. 4 meeting, the Visalia City Council unanimously approved a three-year agreement with CalTrans to fund the clean-up effort of Highway 198 and authorize city contractors to do the work on the state roadway.

"If the 198 corridor is clean, that is a true benefit to the city of Visalia," Nelsen said. "This can make our corridor to the sequoias beautiful."



Under the agreement, CalTrans will grant the city \$555,930 in litter abatement funds through its Clean California State Initiative. These funds will be used to reimburse the city for its contract to provide state right of way litter removal services and administrative costs. The city council also approved a contract with CSET, Inc. to perform the work through its Sequoia Community Corps, a vocational training program teaching young adults the trades of weatherization, urban forestry, conservation education, and recycling. Staff recommended CSET because the nonprofit already provides the same service along city-owned roadways through the city's Environmental Cleanup Opportunities (ECO) Project, a transitional jobs program that assists individuals experiencing homelessness in Visalia gain job readiness skills and work experience, with the goal of obtaining stable employment and housing. CSET could expand the program through the new contract with the city.

A crew comprised of one supervisor and four crew members will work twice a week to remove litter from the highway to remove litter and debris including furniture, appliances, tire casings, bulky and large items, automobile wreckage, auto components, clothing, beverage containers, food packages, and garbage.

CSET will be paid \$138,830 this fiscal year, \$174,620 next year and \$192,080 in 2023-24. The city's portion of the funding will only cover costs of administering the program locally, about 10% of the total cost. The city will pay \$14,000 this fiscal year, \$17,000 next year and \$19,00 in 2023-24.

Councilmember Brian Poochigian commended Nelsen for pushing for the partnership with CalTrans to help beautify the city's stretch of the scenic corridor. He said when he brought complaints to the council about trash along the highway more than six months ago, Nelsen was already working with CalTrans to find a solution to the problem.

"Mayor Nelsen took it upon himself to contact CalTrans and start this process down there," Poochigian said. "It's because of his work we are probably at this point now."

Nelsen said the partnership was a "team effort" thanking Cal Trans and city staff. More specifically, he thanked public works manager Jason Serpa and public works director Nick Mascia, who was recently promoted to assistant city manager, for months of meetings leading up to the agreement last week.

In addition to litter abatement, Mascia pointed out the Clean California Initiative has \$296 million in grant opportunities for local beautification. He said staff will return to Council with future considerations regarding those applications.

"Will see grant funding to into beautification projects, so we are digging into this money pretty deep," Mascia said.

The contract does not include any work to relocate homeless from highway encampments or clean up those areas, which will continue to be handled by the local CalTrans agency. The contract also excludes any graffiti removal and traffic control.

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