

San Bruno homeless advocate makes push for tiny houses

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*Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group
Peter Stiehler, head of Catholic Worker Hospitality House, works on a recently purchased "tiny house" Thursday, Dec. 1, 2016, in San Bruno, Calif.*

SAN BRUNO — As co-director of a charity that helps the homeless, Peter Stiehler operates a pair of boarding houses and wants to open more. But the Bay Area's housing costs have climbed far too high for his humble budget, turning Stiehler into an enthusiastic booster of a growing trend: tiny homes.

Last month, a tiny house on wheels was delivered to his San Bruno nonprofit, Catholic Worker Hospitality House. Once he spruces it up, he plans to use the 105-square-foot abode as a mobile showcase, encouraging his city and others on the Peninsula to tweak their laws in favor of the miniature structures. After that he hopes to let a client use it.

"We feel that tiny houses can be one of the solutions for creating more affordable housing in our community," said Stiehler, whose organization also runs a homeless shelter and a dining room that serves breakfast to about 70 people a day. "It's a quick and easy way to get housing done."

Tiny houses have generated a lot of buzz as an option for dealing with California's affordable housing crisis, and a trio of state laws that take effect in January will remove some regulatory hurdles to constructing them. But there are special bureaucratic obstacles when it comes to tiny houses on wheels, whose mobility plunks them into a no man's land of building and zoning codes.

Stiehler wants to help change that. His wife and co-director of Catholic Worker Hospitality House, Kate Chatfield, introduced him to tiny houses last year as a solution to a persistent problem: finding affordable homes for people who are ready to leave their temporary places of shelter.

On a recent morning he gave a quick tour of his cedar-framed tiny house, which sits in the parking lot of a local church. Stiehler said he spent \$13,000 on the structure, which is just a

shell, and the trailer on which it rests. He figures he'll spend as much as \$10,000 to finish the interior, including a bed, kitchen, work area and bathroom with a composting toilet.

"It's really tight, right?" he said. "There's not going to be much floor space, but I just think of the folks we serve who sleep in their cars, or folks who are sleeping outside. ... It will be an attractive, comfortable, safe, dignified place for people to live."

Fresno and San Jose are innovators in California's tiny house movement. Fresno passed a law that took effect in January allowing for tiny homes on wheels. San Jose recently gained the authority to create tiny houses for the homeless under a law passed by state Sen. Nora Campos, D-San Jose.

But San Mateo County has yet to take the leap. The county has commissioned a report on affordable housing options, including tiny houses, that is due in January.

Ken Cole, director of the county Housing Department, said tiny homes would not make much of a dent in the Peninsula's housing shortage on their own. Still, they are an intriguing option, he said, despite some regulatory headaches.

"We're not putting people on the moon here," he said. "We should be able to figure something out. But it's not a straight line, either."

San Bruno Mayor Jim Ruane was cautious in commenting on Stiehler's initiative. He expressed concerns about sewage and electrical hookups, parking allocations and overall safety.

"I would support things that get creative to house the homeless population," he said, "but we have to make sure codes are respected and complied with."

Some advocates of tiny houses say the obstacles to their implementation are more political than technical. Elected officials are loathe to upset homeowners who fear tiny houses could disrupt their neighborhoods, said Dan Fitzpatrick, California chapter leader of the American Tiny House Association.

One way to get around that concern, he said, is to write narrowly tailored codes allowing for small communities of tiny houses away from existing neighborhoods.

"Every city and county has remnant parcels of land that can't be used or are underutilized," he said, "which become major targets of opportunity for a little housing infill project."

Establishing such a pocket enclave in San Mateo County is Stiehler's "ultimate dream," because it would allow residents to have a sense of community. There's a small parcel in the town where he lives, Brisbane, that would be perfect for such a community, he said.

For the moment, however, he's focused on the first step: a meeting with San Bruno community development officials in January.

But now that he has the bug, Stiehler sees the potential for tiny houses everywhere he goes.

"You say, 'Oh, my god,' you could put one there, you could put three there," he said. "Put a fence around it, landscape it — it would be lovely, and it would serve a need in the community."

Aaron Kinney covers San Mateo County and the Peninsula for the Bay Area News Group.