

San Jose suggests ‘tiny home’ sites for homeless, neighbors balk

Top city housing officials say no final selections have yet been made for the homeless housing communities

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An example of a “tiny home” for the homeless at a recent demonstration at San Jose City Hall.

SAN JOSE — After months of talk about setting up compact “tiny homes” for the homeless, city officials have floated some ideas of where they might put them — and neighbors aren’t happy.

“Some folks think the list that’s published is where these sites will be, which is not at all accurate,” said Ray Bramson, the city’s acting deputy director of housing. “No sites have been selected. We’re continuing to work and listen to the community.”

City officials recently released a list of 100 potential sites for “bridge housing communities” — another term for tiny homes and temporary sleeping cabins — as part of San Jose’s push to reduce homelessness in one of the country’s least affordable housing markets. City leaders plan to build one temporary housing community of tiny homes in each of the city’s 10 council districts for five years.

Assembly Bill 2176, authored by former Assemblywoman Nora Campos, opened the door for tiny homes in San Jose by easing restrictions for building unconventional housing units

— everything from wood-framed sheds to tiny homes. The homes will be taken down when the law sunsets in 2022.

The homes are typically 70 square-feet with a door and window. Each site could have up to 20 units with no more than 25 people housed there. All 10 council districts have a potential site listed, though some have more than others.

The state law calls for using city-owned or city-leased land for the tiny homes. But land is scarce in San Jose and Bramson said it was difficult to find spots that meet the city's criteria — a half-acre or more in size with access to utilities and near public transit.

But some longtime residents, such as Jon Kanter, worry the tiny homes will “destroy” their quiet neighborhoods. Kanter has lived near Thousand Oaks Park in the Cambrian area for nearly 40 years. City leaders are considering putting homeless housing on an 81,000 square foot vacant lot near the park, nestled among tree-lined streets and single-family homes. It's the only site suggested in District 9.

“It will devastate the area — drugs, filthy people, needles in the park,” said Kanter, 72. “It's a danger to children and it's just wrong. We're really worried.”

When asked what he believes would be a good site for the homeless, Kanter said “away from neighborhoods with working people with families and children.”

Jennifer Loving, who runs the nonprofit Destination: Home which works to end homelessness, said the community concerns are understandable but can be addressed.

“It's understandable that people are fearful about things that aren't clear to them, but we can't let fear control us from moving forward,” Loving said. “Homes are the main solution to homelessness. If we want to solve homelessness we need to actually implement solutions.”

But some elected officials are also expressing concerns with the locations.

Councilman Johnny Khamis said a potential site on the northeast corner of Almaden Expressway and Coleman Avenue is dangerous because of speeding traffic and a tricky entrance and exit. His Almaden Valley district has two other options on the list — one of which Khamis suggested. That site, on Branham Lane near Monterey Road, is a vacant grassy field that's attracted homeless encampments in the past.

Khamis also wants to see more permanent housing solutions, not just temporary homes.

“You're wasting all this staff time and it's only going to be a solution for a temporary period of time,” Khamis said. “I'd rather see them spend time supporting permanent structures.”

But homeless advocates have argued that a range of housing options are needed, from temporary to long-term, permanent homes.

Bramson said the city has met with neighborhood leaders about sites in five districts so far. They'll narrow the list down and then host more community meetings, likely in late August or September. The final list will have ten sites — one in each district.