

# San Jose’s tiny homes for homeless: New plan for choosing sites

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SAN JOSE – One of San Jose’s most innovative ideas for housing the city’s 4,000 homeless inside “tiny homes” is back – and this time city leaders have come up with a new way to rank the top sites.

The new scoring criteria – which keeps the homeless housing farther away from schools and homes than marijuana collectives — comes after neighbors earlier this year rallied against 99 potential sites for the tiny homes.

On Monday, the city planned to unveil two designs for the tiny homes, also called “emergency sleeping cabins.” Gensler architectural firm created the two designs to be aesthetically pleasing, according to city staff, but also to be efficient, practical and comfortable.



*Rendering of tiny homes concept in San Jose (courtesy of Gensler, city of San Jose)*

But the biggest challenge, officials said, is deciding where to put the tiny home communities, which would house up to 25 homeless people for five years.

The unprecedented community backlash last summer forced city officials to trim the list of 99 city-owned sites to two. The City Council in August approved a one-year pilot program to try building the tiny homes in no more than three locations citywide.

Now, city leaders are recommending the sites be at least 1,320 feet away from schools and 530 feet away from residential homes — rules that are more stringent than medical pot shops. The city also asked agencies such as Caltrans and the Valley Transportation Authority for help finding sites, and they came up with 23 new options for the tiny home villages.

Combined with the original 99 city-owned sites, 122 locations were under consideration for tiny homes. But after applying the buffer that keep the tiny homes away from schools and homes, only 37 options remain. City leaders are recommending no more than one tiny home community per City Council district.

But to further pare down the list of sites — which still need environmental review — officials are recommending a new scoring matrix to rank them. Each location is assigned points based on its size, how easy it is to develop and who owns the land — public sites are cheaper to develop than private land.

The City Council on Dec. 12 will consider adopting the new scoring matrix and a broad community outreach plan that will include the developer and a professional facilitator. Then city leaders will come back with a list of five to 10 final sites to go through an environmental review process.

Habitat for Humanity was chosen to build the tiny homes. HomeFirst, a nonprofit that runs shelters and warming centers around the county, will operate the villages. The sites must also be near transit, utilities such as water and electricity, and be at least a half acre or a 10,000 square-foot building.

The communities will take about a year to plan, develop and occupy.

The cost of creating tiny homes is a sticking point for some elected leaders. If San Jose builds 20 sleeping cabins on a half-acre site, it'll cost \$90,550 per cabin. If they build 40 cabins on one acre, it'll be \$73,125 per cabin. Those costs rise by \$10,075 to \$17,450 per cabin when services such as security, transportation and meals are factored in.

Some elected leaders want to explore alternatives such as sanctioned encampments. Cities such as San Diego and Seattle have tried legal tent cities.

Councilman Tam Nguyen, who visited a sanctioned encampment in Seattle, said he found it “very practical and workable.” The benefits, Nguyen said, include low costs, no bureaucracy and effective organization.

“Tenants’ motivation to cooperate and behave well were conditions to be admitted,” Nguyen said. “Thus, they became good tenants.”

The outdoor tents are the cheapest option, according to a staff report, costing \$33,575 per resident annually. But advocates worry that it still leaves people out in the cold — and tents often degrade quickly. It'll also be difficult finding a site for the encampment.

“Sleeping in a tent outside is not the best we can do,” said Jennifer Loving, who leads the nonprofit Destination: Home. “There are measures that can provide safety and warmth for people when we need the most. These interim options are meant to be exactly that — a bridge to permanent housing. We have to start somewhere and a home, even temporary, is better than a tent on the ground.”

While lawmakers debate their options, the clock is ticking: AB 2176, the law that allows San Jose to build tiny homes, sunsets in 2022.

City leaders will unveil the two designs for sleeping cabins at a noon news conference today at Gensler's office: 225 West Santa Clara Street, Suite 1100, in San Jose. The City Council will discuss tiny homes at its Dec. 12 meeting.

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