

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

May 29, 2015

Column #31 – Part 1



FIELDS OF DREAMS FOR TINY HOMES

Now they've built the first one, when will others come?

By Wanda Sue Parrott

INSPIRING as last week's announcement on KSBW Action News 8 was--that the mayor of Hollister plans to build a village of microhomes like the one unveiled above--a rash of questions rose from the in-depth coverage by reporter Felix Cortez. They include: If houses as small as this one-bedroom unit with mini-kitchen and bath would help solve the homeless problem on the Monterey Peninsula, where would they be built, when, and who will build them?

A look at the Three Rs of Homelessness will shed some light on the issue: Real Estate; Responsiveness; Resources.

Real Estate And Homeless Housing

Every realtor knows the secret to successful investing in real property is summarized in the saying, "Location, location, location." It's smart to buy a rundown piece of property in a great location, fix it up, and sell for a profit.

But the reverse is true, also. Buying prime property in an area surrounded by blight, impoverishment or shack-like structures can lower one's property value and make it impossible to sell, rent or otherwise profit from ownership.

Property owners and realtors alike might be sympathetic to the homeless, but would they want a village of tiny houses in their literal backyards?

The news that Hollister plans a tiny-homes village indicates such housing has now become more than just a field of dreams in Central California's San Benito County. It is materializing into a movement headed our way, making people—including the homeless—wonder where such little homes will be located in the greater Monterey area.

In a "not in my backyard" community of mansions and mini-mansions, whose owners do not want pebble-sized port-abodes in Pebble Beach, packet shacklets in Pacific Grove or mini- motels in Monterey, the automatic answer seems conclusionary: put them in the Marina/former Fort Ord area where open space abounds. What about water rights, already minimized by the drought?

Not included in such considerations is the fact some tiny houses already exist on the Monterey Peninsula, whether legal or illegal by definition, or known or unknown by authorities.

For instance, in Seaside, where permits are not required for building sheds, shacks, and storage spaces less than 120 sq. ft., human beings are sleeping in such outbuildings that may or may not be wired or plumbed. Since they can be as high as 15 feet, such workshop-style buildings can contain lofts capable of holding one or more mattresses.

A homeless informant advised me that people sleep in the tool and garden sheds on display outside Home Depot when left unlocked at night.

What about running water and sanitary toilet facilities? Think “buckets.”

Responsiveness To Homeless Housing

Jay Shafer, founder of Four Lights Tiny House Company, designed this 112 sq. ft., 1-bdrm., 1-bath home (Model #896-4) for which his plans sell to do-it-yourselfers for \$499. It measures 16 ft. long, 7 ft. wide and 10 ft. high.

Buildings similar to this have been seen in Seaside, which has a high concentration of low-income Hispanic families but an almost non-existent homeless Hispanic population.

Are people living in privately built micro houses like this in backyards? Unknown.

What is known is that multiple Hispanic families occupy single-family units, sharing space and sometimes sleeping in around-the-clock shifts in beds, on couches and on bare mattresses on floors.

The worth of such real estate is not measured in property-value statistics. It is measured by survival value and an indomitable spirit of family experienced by participants who eat, dwell and sleep together in close quarters. Even if not directly related by blood, those who share living quarters introduce themselves as cousins, aunts, uncles, nephews, and nieces. To young people who break away, gangs become substitute families in which members are called brothers and/or sisters.

If offered their own individual tiny homes, would such groups break up in order to have more private space? That question can only be answered after tiny homes almost the size of jail cells have been built and occupied on the Monterey Peninsula in the not-too-distant future.

Jay Shafer has lived in a tiny house, by choice, for more than twenty years. He says, “Living small is a luxury. When you live in a tiny house, you only have room for the things that truly matter. You have to choose what’s essential.”

Resources To Provide Homes For The Homeless

People and provisions constitute the basic resources needed to build tiny homes for the homeless. This photo-story from People went viral in April after 37-year-old Elvis Summers built this portable 3-1/2 ft. by 8 ft. home for a 60-year-old homeless woman friend from supplies he bought at Home Depot. No certificate or license was required of the do-it-yourselfer who created a sleeping box with windows.

He advertised for donations with which to build tiny houses for homeless people and rapidly raised \$19,000 on GoFundMe . He is now working with the Los Angeles Police Dept. to find government-owned property on which to build a village like Mayor Ignacio Velasquez envisions to serve Hollister.

Elvis Summers’ little house cost him a lot of meals. Mayor Velasquez and several private investors paid \$25,000 for their prototype model of micro homes to be used as transitional housing to help the homeless get back on their feet.

Not a penny for either the micro or mini home came from public funding.

Besides supplies and people to build the little houses, land on which to place them is crucial. At present, the most-viable option for such a village is to place the tiny homes on government-owned land that can be acquired on a long-term lease.

Forces are already mobilizing in Monterey County to greet and meet the challenge of a virtual explosion of tiny-home neighborhoods. They will be introduced next week. Meanwhile, you may visit these websites for details about information discussed in this column:

Hollister newscast: <http://www.ksbw.com/news/tiny-houses-in-hollister-help-homeless/33170384>

Elvis Summers: <http://www.people.com/article/los-angeles-man-builds-tiny-house-homeless-woman>

Jay Shafer's Four Lights Tiny House Company.

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