

# Little-box village a new idea to help solve crisis of homelessness

‘Transitional encampment’ model has proved helpful in Seattle and other cities

By MARK HEDIN

WHILE SAN FRANCISCO political office-holders argue over whether the homeless situation in The City is just really, really bad or an official “crisis,” two bicycle-riding activists — one of them an also-ran in the 2015 mayoral election — are invoking the name of the saint for whom the city is named in floating a suggestion on how to help.

Their proposed Saint Francis Village would provide secure, safe sleeping quarters, storage space for campers’ stuff and access to social workers to help navigate their needs for health care, jobs, benefit programs, you name it.

Co-founders Amy Farah Weiss and Ken Fisher, who in April approached the San Francisco Study Center, publisher of



KEN FISHER

**A prototype** of a proposed Saint Francis Village housing structure takes shape in Noe Valley outside the home of co-founder Ken Fisher. Planners expect to eventually put it on wheels, in the hope that doing so will minimize the regulatory process.

The Extra, for fiscal sponsorship, don’t yet have a place for their village lined up. Weiss says they’re hoping to persuade the city to provide unused property or that a sympathetic property owner will let them set up on unused land.

It’s an idea that’s akin to a program currently serving 450 homeless people in Seattle.

Their plan is to begin with a pilot program that will serve five to 10 people for three months and, hopefully, ramp up from there.

They both have, separately, taken the

lead in establishing community gardens in San Francisco, navigating bureaucracy, raising money and coordinating volunteers to get things from the drawing board to the salad bowl.

Fisher says he raised \$40,000 “to rehab an entire city block” on 22nd Street between Castro and Diamond in Noe Valley, the Jungle Stairs. The effort involved 50 community volunteers, he said, and included installing irrigation, planting a mix of 1,000 trees, shrubs, native succulents and more. Every step of the project, from 2012 to 2015, is closely documented at [junglestairs.wordpress.com](http://junglestairs.wordpress.com).

Saint Francis Village co-founder Weiss got 23,099 votes — 12.13% — to finish third in November’s mayoral election. Back in 2011, she paved the way for another community garden, in the NoPa neighborhood at New Liberation Church, on Divisadero between Turk and Eddy. “I had approval from the property owners,” Weiss wrote The Extra, “so I didn’t need to go through any type of approval process with the city.”

“We had insurance through the church and had volunteers sign a hold-harmless agreement.”

As for Saint Francis Village, they have a slide show that starts with a rendering of a mere 1,600-square-foot space, with five different prototypes of the proposed housing units, which they anticipate building about 4 feet high from a base of two pallets, to 6 feet 8 inches long. Planter boxes, a storage shed and an EZ-Up-style canopy such as vendors sometimes use at farmers’ markets add resources and ambiance to the site.

Their projected budget to set up such a site for three months is pegged at a bit less than \$4,000 — \$1,000 for the five housing structures, \$1,000 to buy six locking storage sheds, the rest for the canopy and miscellany such as fire extinguishers and first aid kits, entrance beautification and a garbage/compost/recycling center.

Then there’s the \$4,475 monthly operating budget, consumed mostly by \$3,200 for an “on-site coordinator/project manager.” Another \$400 is allocated to monthly Porta-Potty rental and twice-weekly servicing, \$400 in car rental through Zip, \$250 for garbage/recycling and \$100 for insurance, per a quote from Pennbrook Insurance.

In that projection, the costs come to \$895 per month for each of five residents. But there’s an efficiency of scale when the site is large enough to accommodate 10 people. Then, most of the

fixed costs stay the same except for the toilet service, which doubles. The cost per resident thus drops to \$515 each.

Less clear is what legal hurdles a Saint Francis Village might face. Weiss says she’s waiting for someone in the Mayor’s Office of Housing Opportunity, Partnership and Engagement (HOPE), which oversees the Navigation Center in the 1900 block of Mission, and is seeking to open a new one in Dogpatch, to get back to her on a contact at the Planning Department.

“We want to make sure we’re doing it completely on the up-and-up,” Fisher told The Extra.

So far, for Saint Francis Village, it’s been a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation. Fisher and Weiss said owners of open space who might be willing to contribute it to the cause, or perhaps, in one scenario, donate rent paid back to the project and receive a tax deduction once Saint Francis Village obtains 501(c)3 status, are reluctant to sign on while it’s unclear if they’d be vulnerable on liability or lawlessness issues. But at City Hall, the co-founders are finding, it’s tough to line up allies on a project that is, in itself, homeless.

For instance, in the office of District 9 Supervisor David Campos, who wrote the ordinance the board passed April 12 “declaring the existence of a shelter crisis in San Francisco” and is calling for six new Navigation Centers on city-owned property, his aide, Carolyn Goossens, told The Extra that as far as Saint Francis Village goes, they would have “no comment at this time, until we have more details.”

Downstairs at the office of HOPE, Director Sam Dodge, who’s also met with Fisher and Weiss, told The Extra, “It’s tough. It needs to be thought through. There is a myriad level of code and inspection agencies — fire, health, building code, there’s more — that are not able to simply be told, that can’t just be ignored. And for good reasons.”

“They are pretty focused on being outside,” he continued, “and for a lot of things I wonder if running water, electricity, the potential for heat” warrant more consideration.

“They are talking about this for five people. It’s really primed to be a church property, either a church basement or space that they have.”

Churches do have an advantage over the private sector, in that they’re free of some legal constraints other types of organizations would face.

In Seattle, for instance, which now

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