

Richmond, county eye ‘MicroPADs’ for transitional housing



Tom Lochner/Staff A prototype of a “MicroPAD” living unit was on display Tuesday outside Richmond City Hall.

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RICHMOND — A “MicroPAD” delivered in front of City Hall on Tuesday by a San Francisco developer with long ties to Berkeley is being pitched by local officials as “a bold move to reduce homelessness.”

The 8- by 20-foot MicroPAD — “PAD” stands for “Prefabricated Affordable Dwelling” — comes fully furnished with a bathroom and kitchen. The 160-square-foot unit “can serve as an affordable, scalable and livable supportive-housing option for the area’s homeless residents,” according to a joint announcement by Richmond and Contra Costa County of Tuesday’s unveiling, which featured speeches by Mayor Tom Butt; county Supervisor John Gioia; the county Department of Health Services’ director of health, housing and homeless services, Lavonna Martin; and Michael Thomas, director of business development for developer Panoramic Interests.

The county expects to receive a \$765,000 “Continuum of Care” grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Martin said. There are about 1,600 homeless individuals throughout the county on a given night, said Gioia. The city and county are looking collaboratively for a site for up to 50 units of transitional housing such as MicroPADs, said Butt..

“This is the way to go,” Butt said, adding that some other approaches such as garden sheds or tents in parking lots are “not sustainable.”

Gioia said that during recent visits to homeless encampments, he was told by occupants they would not leave to go to a shelter, but would welcome housing and supportive services, which would be part of the transitional housing discussed Tuesday.

“Dorm-style shelters are not the solution,” Gioia said.

Thomas said the MicroPADS would be built on concrete slabs and would be hooked up to water, sewer and electrical services.

Officials said Tuesday they are looking to city- or county-owned land for the transitional housing, but have not identified any possible site. Another possibility would be land owned by a church or nonprofit organization, they said.

Tom Lochner/Staff
The 8-by-20-foot MicroPAD (“Prefabricated Affordable Dwelling”) was open for inspection as city and county officials touted its potential to reduce homelessness.

While officials gave high marks to Panoramic and its MicroPAD, they said no contractor has been selected to supply the transitional housing. Asked if the county would put out a request for proposals, Martin said the exact selection process has not been determined, but she said it will be “transparent.”

According to the release, the county expects to lease each housing unit for about \$1,300 a month, with part of the cost to be recouped by rent payments from the mostly SSI-dependent tenants and the rest coming from HUD grant funds.

Panoramic Interests, owned by developer Patrick Kennedy, has developed numerous projects in Berkeley since the 1990s, include the Berkeleyan apartments, GAIA building, ARTech building, Acton Courtyard apartments, and Fine Arts building.

The company has shopped the MicroPAD idea to San Francisco and Berkeley, so far without conclusive results. Panoramic displayed a similar MicroPAD in front of Berkeley City Hall for several days in January 2017.

Prefabricated, modular MicroPAD buildings can be put up more quickly and at about half the cost of equivalent conventional units, according to Panoramic's website. The unit on display Tuesday was made in China, Thomas said. Panoramic is considering factories elsewhere in Asia as well as in Eastern Europe, Idaho and Vallejo, he said.

"Individuals can stay in this housing as long as they need it," said Contra Costa County homeless director Lavonna Martin.

As for where the micro pads will go, Richmond city leaders said they are looking for to locate them, but when pressed about possible locations, they admitted that so far they have none arranged.

"We haven't identified locations we don't want to speculate on locations so we don't know but we're going to start looking," said Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia.

Once they find a location, they say they have plans to build up to 50 micropads.

Louisville said he was skeptical about whether this would help the homeless.

"No, no, ain't nearly enough that don't even start to fix the problem,"

At 68, Louisville said he'd love to call one home, but wondered how much longer he has to wait.

"The money that they give me, you can barely live on that," said Louisville.

"Either you pay rent and you don't eat or else you eat and you don't pay rent. I choose to eat."