

## City trailer parks pushed

Architect says project to build temporary housing for Metro Vancouver's homeless would create jobs and inject infrastructure cash quickly into the local economy

Glen Korstrom

Temporary eastside trailer parks will house up to 1,000 homeless Vancouverites in time for the 2010 Olympics if Vancouver architect Gregory Henriquez gets his way.

He envisions various levels of government financing \$44 million in modular housing through already announced infrastructure stimulus packages. That would provide jobs for local businesses such as Henriquez's Henriquez Partners Architects, developer Westbank Projects Inc., Haebler Construction, Cobalt Engineering and pre-fabricated structure manufacturer Britco Structures Inc.

"Speed is the beauty of this," said Henriquez, whose work includes the Coal Harbour Community Centre and Downtown Eastside projects such as the Woodward's development, the Lore Krill Housing Co-op and Bruce Eriksen Place for low-income housing facilities.

The City of Vancouver has the power to immediately grant permits to kickstart the project because the housing would be built on wood blocks instead of on a concrete foundation.

Henriquez said traditional concrete social housing can take two years to get rezoning, development permits and building permits, then another two years to build.

He has drawn up plans for a 48-suite compound with a central courtyard. Occupants of what Henriquez calls "stop-gap housing" would all have doors that open to the outside. The complex would also include a central, second-floor common area.

"It's an interesting and creative idea," Vancouver mayor Gregor Robertson told Business in Vancouver. "There are challenges with funding and locations. We need a broader discussion involving council and staff about the city taking next steps on modular or temporary housing." Henriquez believes some of the \$44 million cost could come from the \$1 billion to fix social housing that the federal Conservative government announced in its January budget.

Other money could come from Victoria. The B.C. Liberals announced February 17 that they're funding \$467 million for local infrastructure projects being built in partnership with local governments and the federal government.

They also announced \$294 million in new operating funding over four years to support economic activity in communities.

Portland Hotel Society CEO Mark Townsend likes Henriquez' temporary housing idea and is part of the team lobbying governments to ante up infrastructure spending.

He identified a possible site as being the barren 15-acre plot along Great Northern Way that Finning International Inc. donated in 2001 to the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, Emily Carr University of Art + Design and the British Columbia Institute of Technology.

Other potential sites include:

- a city-owned site at Union Street and Gore Avenue;
- a Vancouver Port Authority overflow parking lot; and
- Concord Pacific land at 58 West Hastings Street.

"We've seen homelessness double," Townsend said.

"The question is what can you do in the interim rather than put people in cots in warehouses on Main Street and down on Howe Street in temporary shelters?"

"[Modular homes are] a more honourable form of temporary shelter. It's not as good as permanent housing, but it's fast and cost-effective."

He and Henriquez estimate that if \$44 million were spent on conventional concrete housing, little more than 100 units could be built. Modular homes are therefore eight to 10 times more cost effective.

Henriquez expects all involved with the project will do so on a cost recovery basis and not for profit.

Britco co-owner Rick McClymont is curious to see what final plans emerge, but his gut tells him the cost will be more than \$40,000 per unit.

He wants to see some firm price estimates and a contract to sign before he believes the project will proceed. He said he's also talking to another architect about a similar initiative.

McClymont's 310-employee modular structure manufacturer increased revenue approximately 25% to nearly \$100 million in 2008.

Both his Agassiz and Penticton plants are in full production, primarily on Olympic-related jobs, until at least mid-summer.

Still, McClymont gets concerned each day he sees the price of crude oil drop.

"Most of our clients in Alberta are third-party suppliers of accommodation and food to oil patch workers," he said. "There's plenty of doom and gloom out there when these big oil companies back off or shelve expansion plans." •

gkorstrom@biv.com