



Community First Village in Austin, Texas, is made up of dozens of tiny houses and recreational vehicles people call home. Local leaders are trying to create something similar in Volusia County. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MARK GEALLIS

Plan for tiny home village taking shape

Organizer looking to help homeless, elderly, disabled

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When First Step Shelter opened a little over a year ago, local leaders realized there was something else they needed to do to help the homeless as quickly as possible: expand the area's supply of affordable housing. While some have been trying to increase the stock of low-rent apartments and houses in the Daytona Beach area, others have been endeavoring to create "tiny homes." That usually means building houses as minuscule as 80 square feet and no larger than 400 square feet.

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Tiny homes have become an alternative form of housing for decades for people who want to downsize their lives, for the environment or to make ends meet on a very limited income. Pictured is a tiny home in a village of small homes in Texas. Local leaders are hoping to create something similar in Volusia County for the homeless.

Tiny homes

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At the beginning of last year, then-Volusia County Chair Ed Kelley was laying the groundwork to build 100 tiny homes on the city-owned land around First Step Shelter. But when the coronavirus pandemic hit in March, everything screeched to a halt.

Last year Halifax Urban Ministries also considered building tiny homes on its Hope Place family shelter site. But that idea has been shelved for now as well.

Now a third attempt to build tiny homes is taking flight. Mark Geallis, the former executive director of both First Step Shelter and Halifax Urban Ministries, is hoping to create a 150-home tiny house village somewhere in Volusia County.

"My vision is to help people who don't quite fit into society, and the elderly or the disabled who get small checks," Geallis said. "It gives them community and camaraderie. They may not fit with the rest of us, but here they feel comfortable as happy, thriving, full human beings."

He said it will fill a gap that exists even with First Step Shelter open and getting people into housing. He said a large share of Volusia County's homeless people are so entrenched in life on the streets that they'll never consider going to a shelter, but they would be open to communal living in a place of their own.

"It's a permanent solution to their homelessness," Geallis said. "It's not just a steppingstone."

A tiny village with big possibilities

He envisions a peaceful community with some general rules where residents would get help from staff securing government benefits, finding a job and accessing healthcare. Some residents could open micro businesses in the village where they could employ their neighbors, and there would be places in the enclave to worship, get basic healthcare, take part in recreational activities and socialize.

"There's a great need for this in the community," Geallis said.

There's a wide variety of tiny home designs and structures made out of many different types of materials. Geallis isn't sure yet what he'll settle



The Hope Place family shelter just north of Daytona Beach was considered last year as a possible location for establishing a tiny home village for people who need a simple, low-cost place to live. The idea never evolved to fruition. Buck James, executive director of Halifax Urban Ministries and Hope Place, is pictured standing in front of the shelter. NIGEL COOK/NEWS-JOURNAL

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Geallis

on, but the size will probably be 200-400 square feet for each unit. It will probably be a mix of tiny homes and refurbished recreational vehicles, he said.

Smaller units might require community bathrooms and a communal kitchen.

"A home does not need to be large, or elaborate; just comfortable, secure and stable," Geallis said. "Our vision is a community with some shared necessities to build community."

Units would be rented out on an income-based sliding scale of about \$200-\$400 per month.

"It lets them buy in, and feel self worth," Geallis said. "They have power."

He's going to steer clear of government funding and housing programs, which come with restrictions and sometimes slow-paced schedules.

"Our business model is to be 100% funded by donors, foundations and the revenue generated onsite by residents and micro businesses," Geallis wrote on his website, Homeless2HOME.org. "We will not pursue typical government grant funding which restricts innovative programs like ours. What we do want from government is cooperation in needed zoning approvals and consideration for donated land only."

The extremely low-income people he wants to house will get the most

help from a privately funded and privately run program, he said.

"Government affordable housing programs do not fill this gap, take years to establish, face NIMBY objections and are not affordable for many people," Geallis said.

'Residents will live a simple but dignified life'

Geallis, who also has experience running restaurants and in marketing, is in the early stages with his idea. He still needs to set up a nonprofit, raise \$50,000-\$100,000 in seed money to cover everything from legal expenses to infrastructure, and form a team to help him turn his dream into reality.

So far he's raised \$400, talked to a few local leaders who might become his board members, and started to look around the area for property that could become a tiny home village.

He'd like at least 10 acres to begin with 30-40 tiny homes, but ideally he'd like a larger parcel to eventually expand to 150 miniature homes. He's open to establishing multiple locations if necessary.

He's going to talk to the pastor of a local church about possibly using land owned by that house of worship. If that doesn't work out, he'll explore other options including trying to get government-owned land donated. He'll even consider Flagler County property if necessary.

Whatever site he chooses, he said it'll be away from residential areas. While the city owns hundreds of acres around First Step Shelter, which is located off of U.S. Highway 92 about five miles west of Interstate 95, that wouldn't be his top choice. He doesn't want people in the homes he hopes to build to feel like they're just in another stage of homelessness. He wants it to be seen as an alternative to a traditional-size home.

"Our residents will live a simple but dignified life," he said.

The permanent housing village he wants to establish will be modeled on Community First Village in Austin, Texas. Geallis visited that facility about four years ago and was impressed. The village has tiny homes, recreational vehicles, a medical clinic, units for overnight visitors, a small convenience store, outdoor kitchens and communal laundry and bathroom facilities.

He said Community First Village has had minimal expenses since church

groups, construction companies and private donors have all helped.

"I've visited 11 sites, and this one fits my vision the best," he said. "Because our area population is only about 20% of Austin, our project has a smaller scope."

Geallis is working on recruiting partners and board members with specific areas of expertise in medical and behavioral health, CPA skills, legal experience as an attorney, government relations, architecture, construction, media, real estate, banking, business and philanthropy. He's also just looking for volunteers willing to help.

He's already been talking to a local architect who drew up a general property design.

Geallis said he'll be the executive director of the new nonprofit. He'll work for free initially, and once the organization is established he said he'll limit his salary to \$1,000 per week or less.

He said he's had "a great response" from the people he's talked to so far.

Kelley said he probably won't get involved in Geallis' effort. He was disappointed to see the tiny home idea he was pursuing for the First Step Shelter site get sidetracked by COVID-19.

Kelley said he had lined up a dozen people willing to give \$10,000-\$15,000 each, others agreed to help with the infrastructure, and City Manager Jim Chisholm was open to considering the idea. His vision was to build 100 tiny homes on the sprawling city property located far from residential neighborhoods.

The idea was for shelter residents to transition to the small homes after getting their lives back on track at First Step, and then eventually move into a home or apartment. Kelley also had an idea to create another tiny home community for veterans, and he had talked to Hope Place about tiny homes on their site just north of Daytona Beach.

"I think it's just a tremendous need and people were willing to support it," Kelley said. "If you have your own place and you're willing to take care of it, it gives you a different perspective."

When the virus is under control and people feel comfortable meeting face-to-face again, Kelley said he'll consider resurrecting his tiny home efforts.

"It is the most critical missing part of the complex solution to overcoming homelessness in the Volusia and Flagler area," Geallis said. "Until those of us working to overcome homelessness focus on alternative housing options, we will not succeed."