



Memorandum

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR &
CITY COUNCIL

FROM: Councilmember Lan Diep

SUBJECT: ACTIONS RELATED TO
BRIDGE HOUSING COMMUNITIES

DATE: 12/11/2017

Approved

Date

12/11/17

RECOMMENDATION

Adopt the recommendations outlined in the memo drafted by Mayor Liccardo, Vice Mayor, Carrasco, and Councilmembers Jones, Peralez, and Arenas, and in addition, direct staff to:

1. Reflect upon what staff does not presently know about housing the homeless, and articulate how a Bridge Housing Community pilot program will fill those gaps in knowledge (e.g. What hypothesis are we testing? What do we hope to learn?);
2. Identify clear goals for the BHC pilot program and determine guidelines to judge the failure or success of the pilot program;
3. Determine what the City would have to do to legally operate a BHC without the benefit of AB 2176 in the event the pilot succeeds;
4. Return to Council by summer 2018 with items 1-3, above;
5. Identify alternative potential funding sources for Council to consider in time for the budget process, other than Housing Authority Litigation Award funds;
6. Abandon the BHC pilot program if unexpected delays do not allow the City enough time to implement the pilot program for at least one year or some other meaningful timeline suggested by staff and approved by Council.

BACKGROUND

Staff has been instructed to pursue, among other things, building bridge housing communities (BHCs) as part of a strategy to eventually house San José's unhoused population. The stability of knowing where you will sleep brings a sense of normalcy, and from that stability one can more easily be transferred into more permanent housing.

The State of California has supported this effort to pursue tiny homes by passing AB 2176, which allows the City to bypass land use and regulatory issues while providing liability protections to the City in its operation of BHCs.

Community partners, like the Gensler architecture firm, have offered to design pro bono what a BHC might look like, and provided opportunities for staff, homeless individuals, advocates, university students, and the Neighborhoods Commission to collaborate. It seems likely that more support can be found from the private sector to alleviate or lower the costs of this effort. Importantly, our residents across the city have also participated in this process, often voicing concerns and resistance to placing BHCs near their neighborhoods, but also reaffirming their support for efforts to help the homeless.

ARGUMENT

There is no clear method to achieving the goal of ending homelessness and providing housing to everyone who needs it. What is clear is that our present efforts are not enough. While we must continue to invest in efforts that we know have yielded positive results, it is entirely appropriate – and indeed necessary – to explore new methods, to seek out new solutions, and to boldly experiment to discover new lessons on how to address persisting problems.

Efforts around Bridge Housing Communities have served as an opportunity to engage community members to think about homelessness in ways they otherwise might not have. These collaborations should be encouraged. BHCs have achieved results in cities such as Seattle, Portland, and Austin. They are part of a multi-prong solution that merits trying in San José. Staff's suggested standard of operations for BHCs is higher than what is demonstrably necessary for these communities to succeed. However, as we seek to change minds around how the homeless are perceived, and adapt BHCs to address homelessness in San José, it makes sense – at least at first – to do as much as we can to ensure the program's success, and then scale back on programming as we scale up in implementation, should the pilot program prove worthwhile.

Even if the pilot program does not succeed in the way we hope, our attempt can still provide important insights and add to the City's collective knowledge on many fronts. Judging from the community outcry over BHCs after the City raised the issue in July, we still have much to learn. What is the best governance structure for a BHC? How will small spaces impact the mental health of those we seek to help? How much evidence of success will it take to convince skeptics? As of now, there are no answers to these questions. But we cannot hope to have answers to these and many other questions if we do not rise to the challenge of the unknown.

CONCLUSION

The Council should implement Bridge Housing Communities and give the Housing Department the resources it has requested to succeed in this initial effort. But we should require that staff articulate what it hopes to learn before rolling out the pilot program so that we can ask the right questions throughout the pilot's implementation, rather than after its conclusion.