

Vancouver considers recycled shipping containers as social housing

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BY LORI CULBERT, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 12, 2012



Atira Women's Resource Society has proposed to operate a 12-unit building as housing for women in need, on land it owns on Alexander Street. The 320-square-foot units would be created out of 12 shipping containers stacked three high, each with a private bathroom, in-suite laundry and a kitchen with a fridge, stove and dishwasher.

Vancouver city council will consider next week whether to financially back a proposal to create social housing for Downtown Eastside women in recycled shipping containers — believed to be a first in Canada.

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Atira executive director Janice Abbott has heard from "lots of skeptics" who question whether people

should be housed in shipping containers, but she argues they will create nice, safe and affordable accommodations for women without a permanent home.

“When you are standing inside you won’t know you are in a shipping container versus an apartment somewhere,” she said.

Using recycled shipping containers for social housing has been tried in places like Amsterdam, but Abbott said this is a first for Canada.

Atira, a non-profit agency providing services to marginalized women, is asking city hall for \$92,000 to help finance the construction of the \$1.7-million project.

A staff report recommends city council support the request to further its goal of increasing social housing in the Downtown Eastside. And Mayor Gregor Robertson said in a statement Thursday that he hopes council will agree at its meeting next week to provide the money.

“This is the kind of creative housing partnership we need in Vancouver,” Robertson said.

This unusual scheme is, not surprisingly, a much cheaper alternative to building more traditional social housing.

Each unit in the development will cost \$85,000 to make; units of the same size in a traditional building just constructed by Atira cost \$270,000 each, Abbott said.

One unit to be incorporated into the project was an award-winning, energy-efficient suite, created out of a former shipping container by BC Hydro, which was on display during the 2010 Olympics.

After the Games, BC Hydro began looking for a non-profit that could use its trendsetting suite, and that gave Abbott the idea to create the multi-unit development. The timing was perfect, she said, because government funding to build new housing had all but dried up.

The city has already provided a building permit for the project. If all other approvals can be granted in the next few weeks, Abbott said, the development could be ready for tenants by some time in the summer.

The construction would only take a few months. The containers would be modified off-site to create features such as large glass windows. Once on-site, each unit would be set up with electricity and plumbing, and the interiors drywalled.

BC Hydro and MC Quarters, a Vancouver-based manufacturer of modular housing, are sponsoring the project by each providing two units. Atira will buy the other eight.

Six of the 12 units will be rented at the welfare rental subsidy rate of \$375 per month. The others will still be deemed affordable, but will not be accessible to those on welfare.

The development is to be at 502 Alexander Street, beside the new 17-bed Imouto building for young

women, also run by Atira.

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