

From the San Francisco Business Times:

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Our view: Construction unions should not stand in the way of housing for the homeless

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Which is in the greater public interest of San Francisco: Making substantial progress in finally providing housing for homeless people, or fully preserving the occupational prerogatives and political influence of the building trades unions?

Because it's increasingly evident that we're not going to be able to do both. For the second time in barely two years, San Francisco construction unions are attempting to shoot down an innovative proposal that would provide hundreds of units of housing for the homeless, and to do so at a fraction of the usual cost.

As reported this week in the website Beyond Chron, this plan to construct modular "micropads" on surplus public land in San Francisco is in political peril because some of the components would be fabricated overseas. A similar argument successfully torpedoed the earlier plan.

Overseas fabrication is of course now an economic fact of life for dozens of modern industries, one that cuts no ice with building trades. They remain wedded to the traditional model in which raw materials are delivered to building sites and assembled piece by piece by a sequence of specialized craftsmen. While computerized design has been overlaid on top of it, the basic process has not changed in decades or even centuries.

The problem is that this model is increasingly untenable for providing public or affordable housing at a feasible cost. Construction costs have soared in San Francisco to the point where even the smallest unit costs \$600,000 or more to build this way — sometimes much more.

Construction trades are only partly to blame for this cost inflation; building codes, city fees and other mandates have played a large part as well.

But their intransigence about modular construction and other changes increasingly stand in the way of finding solutions. It's particularly acute on housing for the homeless, where cost control is paramount to stretch scarce public funds to serve the maximum number of individuals.

It's hard to believe that the construction trades unions politically and economically powerful role would be threatened by embracing some flexibility in service of a clear public good. It would be a sign of strength, not weakness.



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A homeless encampment under the 101 Freeway overpass.

But if not, it is fair for San Franciscans to pose the questions at the top of this article to their public officials — especially to those who would be Mayor. Each should tell us: If it comes down to a choice between housing for the homeless or the interests of the construction unions, which one would they choose?