

For sale in the Valley: A new home under 300 square feet

By BoNhia
Lee

A growing movement to downsize and simplify life into a couple hundred square feet of space has made its way to the central San Joaquin Valley.

A Fresno company is building tiny houses on trailers. And a community devoted to the pint-sized homes — possibly the first in California — is getting ready to open next month in the Tulare County town of Lemon Cove.

California Tiny House and Lemon Cove Village are among the first to introduce the Valley to a housing trend that started before the Great Recession, but was fueled by the housing bust and an interest to be more environmentally friendly.

“The tiny house movement reflects a desire to live a more fulfilling life with greater freedom, less stuff and no debt,” said blogger Elaine Walker, the creator of www.tinyhousecommunity.com and one of the leaders behind the American Tiny House Association. “People want to chart their own destiny.”

In the Valley, where homes are among the most affordable statewide, the introduction of tiny houses is a surprise. Here, generous home sizes are a given, and a landscape dotted with mini-mansions is commonplace.

“I’ve only heard of a handful of people doing it and most of those people are in the Bay Area or down south in Los Angeles where the cost of (a home) is so much greater than in the Valley,” said Brad Hyatt, an assistant professor in the construction management program in the Lyles College of Engineering at Fresno State. The school is incorporating tiny home construction into its classes.

“I think it’s a great idea because even though things are more affordable here, there’s a large portion of the population that doesn’t have a downpayment on a median-priced house. This becomes a great option for that.”

California Tiny House, a Fresno firm, is building an 18-foot-long and 13.5-foot-high home, totalling around 225 square feet, that can fit inside the living room or master bedroom of many Fresno homes. The company will also have a 20-foot-long house and is working on a beach house design.

The house is built on a trailer for mobility and to get around city building and zoning codes, said Nick Mosley, who started the company eight months ago with his father, Pat, and brother Tyler.

Most cities or counties have a minimum square footage requirement for a building with a foundation. Tiny houses are considered recreational vehicles and subject to RV rules, Nick Mosley said.

But the houses look like small single-family homes, instead of a vehicle, and have the amenities of a typical house. The 18-foot model, made of cedar and called the Sequoia, has a kitchen, living area, bathroom with a flushing or composting toilet and standing shower, and a bedroom loft that fits a queen bed. It can sleep up to five people, Nick Mosley said.

Water is pumped into the home through a hose. A propane tank fuels the stove and oven and an electric cord provides power.

“There’s less than 40 watts (of electricity) in this house, which is basically like a big Christmas light,” Nick Mosley said. “It’s very, very efficient.”

The cost: \$28,000 for a trailer and frame package. High-end homes with appliances and upgrades can cost \$60,000

or more.

“It’s a real good opportunity to be able to live in something and make the payments,” said Pat Mosley, who has more than 40 years of construction experience. “This costs as much or less than a mobile home, less than a car. You can live under \$1,000 a month in one of these things.”

The homes can be used as mobile offices, dorm rooms or in-law suites. They have attracted people who lost homes to foreclosure, retirees looking to downsize and people interested in reducing their carbon footprint.

The Mosleys don’t know how the Fresno market will respond. It’s a community where people “love” big houses, said Nick Mosley, who decided to build tiny houses after reading about it online. The company is targeting the western United States.

“I thought it was a cool idea,” he said. “I figured I had the means to do it.”

Hyatt, the construction professor, thinks retirees and young couples or professionals would be interested, but there’s a challenge, too.

“I think the biggest hurdle you would have to overcome is the site and what amenity you would have in that location or adjacent to that location,” Hyatt said. “That would really be what would draw people.”

That’s where a father and son team from Paso Robles comes in. Dirk and Grayson Dole are turning an old Lemon Cove KOA campground that opened in the 1980s into a tiny house community.

“We found this RV park and said, ‘Oh, it’s so idyllic and so beautiful, what is the best use for it?’ ” said Dirk Dole, a real estate investor and property manager. “The more research we did, the more this tiny house came up.”

Dole called national leaders in the tiny house movement and pitched the idea of creating a place where “tiny housers” could live and and “it was a no-brainer,” he said.

“The problem that most tiny housers have is the ability to stay somewhere legally because of the size of their home,” Dole said. “Being an RV park, we are zoned for that as long as (the home is) under 399 square feet and it’s on wheels. That’s what makes this whole thing work.”

The 11-acre campground along Highway 198, just before the village of Lemon Cove, is nestled into the rolling hills and shaded by small olive trees. There are 55 sites with more than half having electric and water hookups. The other half of the sites are for tiny housers who want to live off the grid.

The cost is \$450 to \$595 a month to rent a space, which includes the use of the community room, coin-operated laundry, kitchen, shower and bathroom facilities, pool, vegetable garden and dog park.

The Doles already have verbal commitments from two people who are interested in pulling their homes into the community.

“We have all the stuff tiny housers would like,” Dirk Dole said, “but don’t have room for because their tiny house is tiny.”

Contact BoNhia Lee: blee@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6495 or [@bonhialee](https://twitter.com/bonhialee) on Twitter.

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