

Public gets first, only peek at Detroit tiny homes

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(Photo: Todd McInturf / The Detroit News)

Detroit — Curious onlookers got their first peek inside the beginnings of Detroit’s largest tiny home project on Thursday during a six-home tour as part of a weekend fundraiser before the first tenants move in this summer.

A steady stream of visitors from all over Metro Detroit tromped through pouring rain for the Cass Community Social Services Tiny Homes Progressive Tour.

Many were tiny home fans, curious to see inside the homes just north of Elmhurst and west of M-10 on Detroit’s west side. Others had been following Cass’ project since it was announced last year. Visitors were served tiny treats at each house.

“I love how they all look different,” said Albert Jordan of Southfield, who came with his fiancée Lina Baker, also of Southfield.

The tiny homes tour, which runs through Saturday evening and will raise funds toward building more homes, marks the first and last time visitors will get to see inside these small houses — no bigger than 400 square feet — which have sparked interest from across the world.

The \$1.5 million project, spearheaded by Cass and funded by donations and grants, is unique because it’s not just about tiny homes.

The Rev. Faith Fowler, Cass’ executive director, believes tiny homes also could be a new model for low-income housing and a solution for blighted neighborhoods. She says the last time

anything was built in the neighborhood where these tiny homes now stand was in 1974 — and it was a garage.

Fowler said the reason all six houses are architecturally different — no two are alike — is because they want future owners to take pride in their homes. Each house will be rent-to-own based on square footage at \$1 per square foot. So often in the past, low-income housing resembled a bland rectangle or box, Fowler said.

“There was no pride involved,” Fowler said of the earlier housing options.

The houses range in size from 290 square feet to 360 square feet. Each has a fully functional kitchen, bathroom and setup for a washer and dryer. Only two of the six have separate bedroom areas, but at least two also have lofts. Furniture giant Herman Miller provided dinette sets for each house.

Interior designer Debi Hollis of Interior Lifestyles in Royal Oak bought and staged the bulk of the furnishings for all six houses. One has a nautical theme, two are more modern, another has a cottage aesthetic and one is furnished in a more vintage way.

“My goal always was to make these look as much like a home as possible,” said Hollis, who said the furnishings will be given to each new tenant. “They’ll always feel at home.”

For some, taking Thursday’s tour dispelled perceptions they had about tiny homes.

Volunteer Karla Bole, who served as a guide in one house on Richton Street (each house is named after its architectural plans), said one visitor was a 6-foot-4 man who works at the Department of Housing and Urban Development who’d always thought of tiny houses as cramped and small.

“He said, ‘This isn’t. It feels open,’ ” Bole said.

Tim Simms of Plymouth agreed. He toured the six houses with his wife, Marti, and friends Pat and Jim Robertson.

“It was really open and airy,” said Tim Simms after visiting the first one on Monterey. “You don’t feel closed in.”

Marti Simms liked the development’s approach to low-income housing: “I think it gives you dignity.”

And while some may criticize the cost of these homes — they cost \$40,000-\$50,000 each to build, though much of the work and labor have been donated by volunteers — Fowler says critics “don’t have to live there.” She says answering the critics is one reason why she’s written a book about the history of small housing and affordable housing. It’s called “Tiny Homes in a Big City” and will be published this summer by Cass’ publishing arm.

More than 120 people applied to live in the first six houses of what could one day be a 25-house development. Tenants, a mix of low-income seniors, students and formerly homeless, have been selected, though they haven’t been notified yet. The homes are not intended for families.

“These are the people who want to live here,” said Fowler.

Construction, meanwhile, will start this summer on three more tiny houses in the development.