

Devcore proposes tiny homes community on site of Gatineau tent city



A file photo from January shows a tent resident working to clear snow and ice buildup on the roof of her tent. Photo by Spencer Colby /Postmedia

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The Gatineau development company that spearheaded the establishment of a tent city beside the Robert Guertin Arena has proposed that a new community of tiny homes be constructed on the same site.

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Devcore Group announced Tuesday that the Guertin campground, which includes 48 heated tents, would close as scheduled on May 15.

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Volunteers and Devcore employees will then begin to dismantle the camp, including its fences, toilets, security station and warming hut.

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“Devcore has made the difficult decision not to continue (the camp),” the company said in a news release.

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It said the heat of the parking lot and construction at the Guertin Arena — it is scheduled for demolition — made the site inappropriate for a summer encampment.

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Those people now living on the site will be allowed to keep their tents, Devcore said, along with all of the equipment that came with them, including lamps, beds, sleeping bag and storage bins.

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The tents will be modified with mosquito nets to make them more suitable for the summer months, said Sylvie Carbonneau, Devcore's senior director of communications.

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Devcore also announced that it had submitted a proposal to the City of Gatineau to build a community of tiny homes on the Guertin site.

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Devcore and a group of private investors plan to pour up to \$4 million into the scheme if Gatineau agrees to provide city services, including water and sewer, to the community.

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Carbonneau said the community would comprise 54 shipping containers, each divided into two or three living units. All of them will be equipped with heating, air-conditioning, a bed, fridge, cupboard, sink and toilet.

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"It's really a small unit with everything someone needs to live in," Carbonneau said.

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According to the proposal made to the city, tenants in the tiny homes will be charged \$300 a month in rent.

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The community will be able to house about 100 people and will include a community kitchen, garden and dog park, Carbonneau said.

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The City of Gatineau is studying the proposal.

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“Everybody is mobilized and everybody wants to find a solution to this problem,” Carbonneau said.

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Late last year, the city of Peterborough, Ont., built 50 tiny, modular homes on the edge of downtown to help its homeless population survive the winter. Each 107-square-foot, single-room home cost about \$21,000 and came equipped with a heating and cooling unit, double bed, mini-fridge and dresser. The Province of Ontario contributed more than \$2 million to the project, which costs \$1.9 million a year to operate.

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Many housing advocates consider tiny homes a necessary measure to address Canada's unprecedented homelessness crisis and an affordable source of emergency, transitional housing.

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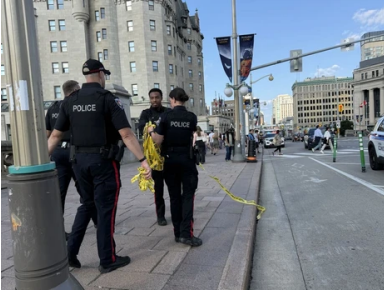
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Gatineau's new tiny homes village comes with communal kitchens, private porches, and a max five-year stay

Canada's largest tiny home village is built to be temporary. When the lease expires, the land and its serviced lots will be returned to the city.



An artist's depiction of one of the tiny homes that will be part of Village Transitiön in Gatineau. Photo by Devcore Group /HANDOUT

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The country's largest community of tiny homes is expected to open in Gatineau by Christmas, providing a refuge for up to 100 [people who now find themselves homeless](#).

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The innovative project, known as Village Transitiön, will replace the tent city that opened last year in the parking lot beside Robert Guertin Arena.

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"The project is on track and is progressing well," said Sylvie Charbonneau, a spokesperson for The Devcore Group, the development firm spearheading the project.

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The village's water, sewer and electrical systems are now being built and connected to those from the City of Gatineau.

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The [Village Transition community will be composed of 85 modified shipping containers](#) each replete with a bed, sink, toilet, fridge, storage space, even a small porch. The containers — units will be either 100 or 150 square feet — will also include heating, conditioning and high-speed internet access. The larger units will feature double beds and full kitchens.

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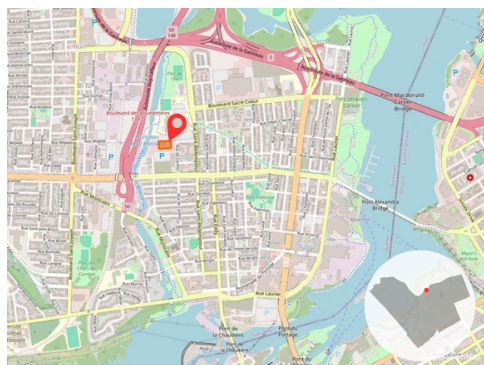
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The village will also include two communal kitchens, laundry facilities, a greenhouse, garden, dog park, bicycle repair shop and an intervention centre with social and psychological support services.

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In October, the City of Gatineau announced it would commit \$1.5 million to the project, which is being managed by the non-profit group Transition Québec. The city also agreed to lease a portion of the land beside the arena to the group for 10 years.

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Map locates Robert-Guertin Arena in Gatineau. Photo by Robert Cross

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When the lease expires, the land and its serviced lots will be returned to the city.

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Nancy Martineau, director general of Transition Québec, said the first modified shipping container was scheduled to arrive in a few weeks.

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“Our goal is to be able to place 72 people before Christmas, and the rest after Christmas,” she said.

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To qualify for a unit, potential residents must be currently homeless, at least 18 years of age and Quebec residents.

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Last week, Martineau said, the first 82 people approved for spots in Village Transitiôn were to receive their letters of acceptance.

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A depiction of the Village Transitiôn community of tiny homes being built in Gatineau to provide housing for people who are currently homeless. Photo by Devcore Group /HANDOUT

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The tiny homes community is funded through an unusual collaboration bringing together both public and private sources of revenue.

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Revenue sources include a \$3-million bank loan underwritten by Transitiôn Québec and \$2.5 million from the sale of the housing units to private individuals and companies. Rent payments will be used to repay the loan and to make interest payments to investors.

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The approach, Martineau said, allows a diverse set of actors — philanthropists, entrepreneurs, businesses and foundations — to participate in a local, sustainable project to combat homelessness.

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The Outaouais health authority's mental health and addiction programs directorate will also contribute staff resources to the village.

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No longer homeless, some locals are living inside shipping containers in Gatineau

When David Desbiens had nowhere to live, he found refuge inside a tiny homes community from land developer Devcore.

By **Alexa MacKie**, [Special to the Citizen](#)
Published Jan 23, 2025Last updated Jan 25, 20255 minute read  [12 Comments](#)



David Desbiens was sleeping in shelters until he recently moved into a Gatineau tiny homes community from land developer Devcore. He can stay there as long as he needs until he can find more permanent housing. PHOTO BY ALEXA MACKIE / OTTAWA CITIZEN / POSTMEDIA NETWORK

David Desbiens shared a home with his family for a decade.

He lived with his girlfriend, Phanie Carriere, and his 11-year-old daughter, Analucia. The three-person family shared a four-year-old

dog, Koopa — affectionately named after the Mario Bros character.

But in September 2024 a new owner took possession of Desbiens and Carriere's rented home. The family had to move out.

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“We can't do nothing about it,” he said.



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With nowhere to go together, the family was forced to separate.

Analucia went to live with her mother; Desbiens says he tries to see her when he can.

Desbiens stayed with Carriere at her father's place for a month before he had to move out.

With nowhere to go, he sought out a local shelter, Le Gîte Ami, but he didn't think it was a place to keep Koopa. So he had no choice but to give his loyal pet away to friends of friends.

And, just like that, Desbiens was alone.

Living in a shelter was far from ideal. The sound of constant screaming and loud noises throughout the night made it difficult for him to live in peace, he says.

Little did Desbiens know that, in just a few weeks, he'd find his peace in a light green shipping container located in a Quebec parking lot.

Life in Village Transiti n

Since Dec. 23, 2024, people experiencing homelessness have been moving in on a rolling basis to Village Transiti n in Gatineau. On top of a couple of inches of January snow, there are 45 orange, green and white shipping containers spread out within the gated village. The giant boxes have been repurposed into homes, complete with electricity and running water.

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Previously, the lot was occupied by [48 heated tents](#) set up for people experiencing homelessness.

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In the parking lot beside the former Robert-Guertin Centre — once home ice to junior hockey's Gatineau Olympiques — Gatineau land developer Devcore began constructing the village in October 2024. The homes are managed by non-profit group Transitiôn Québec.

According to Nancy Martineau, the group's executive director, 31 people had moved in as of Jan. 17. The village is intended to house 100 people experiencing homelessness by the end of May.

"This is something that I've dreamed of," Martineau said about seeing the village come alive with residents. "I'm very proud of it."

Martineau said more facilities, like communal kitchens and laundry spaces, would open up in the spring.

Desbiens moved into his mint green shipping container home at the edge of the lot on Jan. 9.

"I was happy," Desbiens said, recalling the first time he saw his new living quarters. "Everything was there. I have all the stuff I need."

Inside, he has a small kitchen space with a toaster oven, two electric burners, a mini fridge and a sink. Croissants and other foods his girlfriend and her father dropped off are scattered across his counter. A toilet sits to the left, hidden behind a partial wall with an open doorway.

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One of the first things he appreciated, he said, was the relative solitude of his new home.

“I can go in my room, close the door, and be alone,” he said with a smile. “Here, I’m not afraid my things will get stolen.”

The door to Desbiens’s shipping container home opens with an electronic key fob.

As relics of his previous home, dozens of Desbiens’s stuffed animals — including Scooby-Doo, Pikachu and Bart Simpson — are piled upon his bed. Mounted on the wall to the right of his kitchen is a small TV, which catches a slight glare from the light emitting through the window on the opposite side of the room.

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“When I arrived there was a pillow, a blanket, a TV,” Desbiens recalled. “Brand new.”

Martineau says every container home will have internet access and heating, but residents can choose between a smaller, 100-foot or larger, 150-foot living space. The latter is equipped with a full bathroom and kitchen.

Desbiens is currently staying in the smaller option until the larger room he applied for is ready.

“For now, this is better than over there,” Desbiens said, gesturing towards Gîte Ami across the street.

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David Desbiens has a small kitchen space with a toaster oven, two electric burners, a mini fridge and a sink inside his temporary home. PHOTO BY ALEXA MACKIE /OTTAWA CITIZEN / POSTMEDIA NETWORK

‘Everybody needs to have a goal’

Rent varies between \$200 and \$500, based on the resident’s income, Martineau said.

Desbiens is currently paying \$227 per month.

“I would pay that just for the tranquility,” he said with a laugh.

During the application process, potential residents were interviewed by Transiti n Qu bec workers, according to Martineau.

“We need to know if you want to work on yourself,” she said. “For some people, it’s getting welfare cheques. For some people, it’s having their identity card. For others, it’s doing their income tax.

“Everybody needs to have a goal and work on it.”

Desbiens says he “knows his flaws,” including his alcohol and drug consumption, and what he needs to work on.

Thanks to the security Village Transiti n offers, Desbiens is ready to start looking for a steady income beyond his regular welfare cheques.

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“I have more motivation in the morning and I can sleep better at night,” he said. “Now that I’m here, I can go look for a job.”

He adds that he is also thinking of going back to school to obtain his high school diploma. He is only missing French and physics credits.

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Beyond temporary housing

Martineau says the village is intended to provide a transition period to integrate people back into regular housing. Residents can stay between one to five years.

“Everywhere else you go, you can stay a month, sometimes two or three months, and you have to find a place ... but here you can take your time,” she said. “When you don’t know where you’re going to sleep next month, it’s hard to make plans for your life.”

Martineau says she hopes most residents will find a place to stay after five years. However, she said that, if residents still can’t find a permanent home, Village Transitiôn will continue to house them.

“It’s up to them to tell (us) when they want to leave,” Martineau said.

Despite everything the village offers, not all experts are convinced tiny home transitional housing is the best strategy for tackling homelessness.

Tim Aubry, a retired University of Ottawa professor who researches homelessness, says studies about the use of tiny home

villages to address homelessness are lacking.

“There’s not really much research into their effectiveness,” Aubry said. “To some extent, it’s an experiment. It will provide shelter and hopefully the sheltered people will be satisfied with it. We’ll see.

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“But it’s not regular housing. It’s not moving people into a place that’s going to be permanent.”

Desbiens, meanwhile, is unsure how long he’ll be staying in the village.

“I want to move out,” he said, “but I’ll make sure I’m not going out and having to come back later.”

His long-term goal — other than adopting another dog — is to bring his family back together under one roof.

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“We’re looking for a place,” he said. “When we can go somewhere, we’ll go.”

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Gatineau shipping container village prepares residents for the next step

The hardest part of Jean-François Bourgon's transition to apartment living was letting go of the freedom and community he'd come to know after a lifetime on the streets and years living in a sprawling tent city in central Gatineau, Que.

"We're a big family here," Bourgon said of the dozens of weathered tents and permanently parked RVs in the parking lot of the former Robert Guertin Centre, now demolished.

"I was in an apartment for two years and I had to let go of my apartment to come back here because I was missing the place and my friends," he said.

But life here can be rough, too. Robbery, addiction and the struggle to survive are daily realities.

Now there's another option for Bourgon and his neighbours, right on the edge of the parking lot they call home.

In the winter of 2023, developer Devcore brought the local business community together to set up heated ice fishing tents at the site, so the growing homeless population could survive the winter.

By May 2024, those were removed to pave the way for sturdier shelters made of shipping containers. Village Transitiôn's first residents moved into their new homes that December.



Michel Tremblay is one of the 32 residents who currently call Village Transição home. They could soon be joined by many more. (Omar Dabaghi-Pacheco/CBC)

100 living units

It's a compact, fenced-in community of 85 containers transformed into 100 independent living units. Advocates describe it as an important stepping stone from homelessness to independent living, without the isolation that sometimes comes with it.

"When you get out of the bush, it's hard to go [into an] apartment," said Nancy Martineau, Village Transição's executive director. "If you don't have any family, any friends ... you need the kind of place like [this]."

Inside each container are private housing units complete with a bed, a window, a shower and a private toilet. The community is landscaped with stone walkways, trees and blueberry bushes.

It's a stark contrast to the tent community on the other side of the fence. Martineau said that's intentional.

"If people cannot dream and think about the future, they cannot heal," she said. "You just have your welfare check, you go on drugs and you just wait for the time to pass because you don't have any dreams."

Thirty-two residents currently call Village Transição home. No visitors are allowed, and a security guard makes sure of that. A handful of

outreach workers and nurses are on hand to help people get to appointments and access care.

Everyone here pays a subsidized rent and is responsible for the cost of anything they break — a crucial stepping stone toward taking on a lease and living responsibly, Martineau said.



Jean-François Bourgon is back in the nearby encampment after being asked to leave Village Transition. While he said he found it difficult to follow the community's rule, he said he'd like a second chance at living there. (Omar Dabaghi-Pacheco/CBC)

An economical solution

The container village is run by the non-profit Transition Québec with a \$2-million loan from Devcore. The City of Gatineau invested \$1.5 million and has lent the land for 10 years. The province put up \$1.14 million in startup costs, plus an additional \$894,000 per year for rent subsidies.

Rent is roughly 25 per cent of each resident's income, which is typically limited to their social security and other supports. That brings in roughly \$200-\$500 dollars a month per resident.

Research from the *Union des Municipalités du Québec* and other studies show each person experiencing homelessness costs the province roughly \$70,000 per year. Martineau said Village Transition can house that same person for about \$20,000 per year.

That's saving taxpayers about \$50 million over the course of the 10-year lease, Martineau said.

"We want to be a kind of organization that is going to be able to be free of debt one day," she said.

Following the rules

Manon Dessureault has been living at Village Transition for a few months. She said she doesn't mind paying the rent, but she has mixed feelings about the fence and the strict no-visitors policy.

"We pay our rent, but they don't leave us alone. 'Do this, do that,'" complained Dessureault, a mother and grandmother.

At the same time, she said she's spent enough time on the streets and in nearby encampments to understand why some separation is needed between the container village and the encampment.

"They have to because people were becoming animals, for crying out loud," she said. "It was crazy, it was a free-for-all. People were getting beat up, getting hurt, getting raped."

It's not for everyone. After losing his first apartment, Bourgon was accepted into Village Transition, but said he found it hard to adapt to the rules around cleaning and smoking. After repeated warnings to follow those community standards, he was asked to leave.

"You're not allowed to have a visit, no family, no friends, no nothing from outside the containers," he said. "It's very sad."

Village Transition is currently conducting interviews for the next round of applicants, and Bourgon said he's hoping for a second chance.

In the nine months since it opened, four residents have left Village Transition to move into their own independent living units. Dessureault said she's already thinking about taking that step, too.

"To get my own place, get out of here," she said. "This is good for five years, but I don't want to be here for five years."

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