

A NEW IDEA IN HOUSING

THE SOLUTIONS TO the lack of reasonably priced housing in Massachusetts are usually discussed in terms of low-income housing tax credits for developers, reduced mortgage rates for first-time home buyers, and other government subsidies. But the better answer may be framed in terms of steel beams, roof rafters, and prefabricated exterior walls.

In Boston, public officials are evaluating an intriguing business plan from a Swedish manufacturer of factory-built homes, Scanhouse, that could do more to open the housing market for moderate-income buyers than dozens of government programs. Mayor Thomas Menino, Boston Redevelopment Authority officials, and union leaders in the building trades are not only contemplating extensive use of so-called "panelized homes" in the affordable market but the construction of a manufacturing plant in the city's Marine Industrial Park that could produce the components for 2,000 homes each year.

Families earning less than \$50,000 yearly — about one-third of the households in Massachusetts — have been swept out of the housing market. But wider use of manufactured housing raises the hope that a well-crafted, 1,500-square-foot, three-bedroom home that meets federal standards for design, strength, and fire safety could be brought to an overheated market like Greater Boston for less than \$200,000. Thousands of families might at last walk on their own floors.

Yesterday, Mayor Menino and BRA Director

Mark Maloney toured a Scanhouse home under construction in Belmont, where company officials pointed proudly to triple-glazed windows, top-quality rafters and ridge beams, and extra-thick insulation. Entire walls, with windows and doors installed, had been transported to the site and put into place by crane. Scanhouse officials pegged final construction costs for this home at \$87 per square foot, roughly 20 percent less than modest panelized homes recently erected in Roxbury.

Factory-built homes, which are usually constructed in nonunion shops, ordinarily would give labor leaders fits. But Joe Nigro, the head of the Boston Building Trades Council, is actively involved in trying to bring the union-built Scanhouse product across the ocean. He sees ample finish work for union carpenters and opportunities for plumbers and electricians. And the creation of a manufactured housing factory in Boston, says Nigro, could keep 40 union workers and apprentices on the job 12 months each year.

Mayor Menino is also eyeing roughly 20 acres of state-owned land at the former Boston State Hospital in Mattapan as a potential site for as many as 200 panelized homes. Several housing developers have expressed interest in the long-vacant site.

A few small-scale experiments with manufactured housing are underway in Seattle, Milwaukee, and elsewhere. The local proposal, if implemented, would elevate Boston to the top of the list of entrepreneurial cities that lead in creating high-quality, low-cost housing.