

Bill Would Control Sale Of Mobile Home Parks; Residents Would Get First Chance to Buy

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At a time when mobile home parks are being steadily replaced by more upscale housing, the Maryland General Assembly will consider legislation that would give residents of parks in Howard County and elsewhere a chance to hold on to their affordable communities.

Under the "right of first refusal" bill, the owner of a mobile home park intending to sell the property would be required to notify residents and allow them to make a collective offer to purchase the park. The owner would be required to accept the tenants' offer if it were comparable to other offers.

"While we are talking about a lack of affordable housing in Howard County, we can be putting people out of their homes" when a mobile home park closes, said Howard Del. Elizabeth Bobo (D), a bill sponsor. "This will in some ways help offset that."

She said the county delegation had written the legislation in response to requests by the interfaith community organization **People Acting Together in Howard** County. The group, which was formed in 2006 and works with about 30 civic organizations and congregations, seeks better youth services, improved mass transit and more affordable housing.

The closing of several mobile home parks in recent years and ongoing development pressures that threaten the county's remaining eight parks helped dramatize the need for the legislation, said the group's lead organizer, Hector R. Rodriguez of Columbia. Many of the oldest mobile homes are difficult or impossible to move. Owners of newer homes frequently must travel miles to find a park with a vacancy.

According to the U.S. Census, Howard had 1,803 mobile homes in 2000. That number has dwindled to about 1,300, Rodriguez said.

"As it stands now, it's a foregone conclusion that park after park in Howard County will cease to exist, and hundreds of residents will have to figure out where to go and what to do," he said.

Rodriguez called the right-of-first-refusal bill "one tiny step along the road" toward recognizing the potential collective power of the county's mobile home park residents.

"We're not pretending this is a solution," Rodriguez said. But it would help to have the state of Maryland say mobile home park residents "can have the right of first dibs" on their parks.

"They would have to form a cooperative and get the financing together," Rodriguez said. But it's not uncommon for residents to pay more than \$500 a month in rent to the park, he added.

That's a lot of money. It could be tough, but not inconceivable, that they could become the masters of their own destiny."

The bill will be among more than 2,300 considered by state lawmakers in the 90-day session, scheduled to end April 7.