

Mobile home park residents seek relief

Threat of closures, lack of affordable housing prompt state bill

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Amy Lamke was about to give up on living in Howard County when she learned about Deep Run Mobile Home Park in Elkridge.

After she divorced several years ago, she and her daughter looked at apartments and tried living in a shared home, but found that rents were too high and shared housing left them with no privacy or security.

Three years ago, she discovered Deep Run Mobile Home Park, a 620-unit park on Old Waterloo Road, and with it both an affordable place to live and a sense of community.

But there's one problem: While she owns her home, she does not own the land it sits on. At any point, the owner could sell or redevelop, leaving Lamke and her neighbors searching for housing, she said.

"We're really, really happy," said Lamke, 43. "But there is the nagging fear ... in the back of all of our minds."

That fear is why Lamke supports a statewide bill, being considered this year in Annapolis, that would require mobile home park owners to come up with relocation plans for residents if owners decide to sell or redevelop.

A similar bill affecting only St. Mary's County was signed into law last year. That bill requires mobile home park owners to submit to the county a detailed relocation plan if they decide to change the way they use their land or sell it. The plan must include a list of park residents, a relocation timeline and a budget showing how much money the owner would spend to help residents move.

One of the main supporters of the statewide bill, state Sen. James Robey, an Elkridge Democrat, said the bill could help people uprooted by redevelopment. With mobile home parks around the state shutting down in recent years — and counties often chipping in with relocation expenses and other aid — park owners should be required to do more, he said.

"They have a right to (sell or redevelop) and I fully appreciate that," Robey said. "But I'd like to see them provide some assistance to those people who've been there so long and have paid their rent."

Robey should know about mobile home park closures: He was the Howard County executive from 1998 to 2006, during which at least six mobile home parks shut down in the county. He said the county helped negotiate payments to residents of Pfister's in North Laurel when the park closed to make way for the expansion of an ice cream plant, one of the largest such closures in the county.

Robey said the statewide version of the bill is still being drafted, but he has circulated it among people in the mobile home industry to get feedback. It is too early to tell if it faces any significant opposition, he said.

Officials with the Manufactured Housing Institute of Maryland, an industry trade association that lobbies lawmakers on mobile home-related bills, did not return a call for comment.

Mobile home parks face a tenuous future in Howard County.

In the past five years, Ev-Mar Mobile Home Park and Pfister's, both in North Laurel, and Aladdin Village, in Jessup, have closed to make way for redevelopment along Route 1.

Nine mobile home parks, with a total of about 1,400 households, remain in the county, according to the county Department of Planning and Zoning and 2007 Census data estimates. All are in the eastern part of the county, and all, except for Deep Run, are in the Route 1 corridor.

Officials with the local community advocacy organization People Acting Together in Howard (PATH), which has taken the lead on helping local residents faced with park closures, said they are not aware of any parks that are in the process of closing now.

Last year, PATH pushed for a bill that would have given Howard County residents the right of first refusal to buy their parks before the owner could sell. The bill had the unanimous support of the local legislative delegation and passed the House, but it stalled in the Senate Rules Committee, said Del. Guy Guzzone, a Columbia Democrat.

PATH initially considered pursuing the right of first refusal bill again this year on a statewide level, lead organizer Cynthia Marshall said, and even met with Gov. Martin O'Malley about that possibility. But when O'Malley declined to put it in his legislative agenda for the year, PATH decided, for now, to focus on making the St. Mary's relocation bill apply statewide, Marshall said.

"There are several protections that mobile home owners need," she said. "This, along with the right of first refusal, are two important ones."

Lamke was among those who spoke in favor of the bill at the local legislative delegation's public Feb. 4. While Deep Run's owners have not indicated they plan to sell, Lamke said it would be helpful to have laws

on the books offering some protection to residents, in case the owners change their minds.

"I don't know what I would do" if the park closed, she said. "It's still so expensive to live in this area. I think we'd just have to move out of the county.

"These are our homes, our future and our lives that are at stake here," she told the delegation.