

Legislation gives mobile-home owners protection if land is sold



Amy Lamke works in a community garden next to her mobile home at Deep Run in Elkridge, Md., where she has lived since 2005. (Michael S. Williamson/the Washington Post)

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For years, Amy Lamke's answer to her affordable housing dilemma was bouncing with her daughter, Katlin, from one place to another, sharing space with strangers whom she met through classified ads.

But when she discovered Deep Run, a community of mobile homes tucked away off a two-lane road near Route 1 in Elkridge, in [Howard County](#), Lamke figured she had found the stability she and her daughter had longed for.

The divorced mother bought a gray single-wide with two bedrooms for \$19,000 in 2005. It had a wood-paneled interior and barely enough room to fit her bulky living room furniture. She planted bushes, hung a wind chime and arranged lawn furniture on her porch.

"I finally had the peace of mind of owning my own home," said Lamke, who works as a price analyst for a store warehouse and was able to pay off her mortgage in three years.

But, like many who live in mobile home parks across the country, Lamke also felt vulnerable because she doesn't own the land beneath her home. She rents it.

"The fear is there" of the park closing, she said, and being sold to high-end housing and commercial developers looking for land in rural areas.

Fear of losing her community is what drove Lamke and other affordable housing advocates to lobby state lawmakers this year. They pushed for legislation that, they say, discourages owners

of mobile-home parks from selling their properties. If the landowner does sell, it provides the homeowner with some protection.

Under the law, which was passed earlier this year, a mobile-home park owner who wants to sell and change land use must give written notification to the residents and provide displaced homeowners with a relocation plan and relocation assistance that equals 10 months' worth of rent. The legislation applies to mobile parks with more than 38 sites.

According to the Maryland Department of Assessment and Taxation, the state had 17,987 sites in 493 mobile home parks in January. Howard had the most parks with 69, and Anne Arundel County had the most sites with 3,316. [Prince George's](#) County had six parks with 1,082 sites, and [Montgomery](#) County had 10 parks with 97 sites.

"It doesn't prevent the parks from closing, but it makes them more serious about the decision," said Cynthia Marshall, a lead organizer with People Acting Together in Howard, an interfaith group that works on social and economic justice issues.

Marshall said that the legislation will make park owners consider the needs of residents, many of whom have difficulty making ends meet.

Larry Checca, executive director of the [Manufactured Housing Institute of Maryland](#), which lobbied against the bill, said the legislation will probably not do what its proponents had hoped.

Checca said there were park owners with 500 to 600 sites pushing for the bill who will probably sell their properties.

"The cost is fixed, and it's basically affordable for the big park owner," Checca said. "I think you are going to see a lot of land involved in change of use in the future."

Jim Anderson, division president of Hometown America, a company that owns 130 properties in 32 states, including one in Capitol Heights, said the provision that requires park owners to provide 10 months' of rent seems unfair, given that they also would have to devise a relocation plan that includes the cost of disconnecting utilities and removing the homes.

"It would be very, very expensive," said Anderson, who added that his company has no plans to sell. "The land would have to be very, very valuable" to decide to sell.

[Maryland Attorney General Douglas F. Gansler \(D\)](#) sent a letter to [Gov. Martin O'Malley \(D\)](#) [deeming the bill constitutional](#). Gansler said a number of states, including Minnesota, have found mandatory tenant relocation assistance by park owners to be constitutional. Washington state courts, however, struck it down, Gansler said, basing its decision on the state's constitution.

[Sen. James N. Robey \(D-Howard\)](#), the bill's sponsor, said he introduced the measure out of concern over what appeared to be the demise of mobile home parks.

"Owners are getting out of the business, changing their property to commercial zoning, condos and townhouses," he said. "It's worth more money, but folks are being forced to relocate."

About three years ago, developers bought a mobile home park in St. Mary's County. Now the land is the home of a Kohl's department store. County officials say another property was bought to build townhouses.

"We had people quite concerned because they didn't have high incomes," said John W. Savich, county administrator in St. Mary's County. "They didn't know how they would cope."

Some of the residents moved in with family members. Others, thanks to about \$300,000 from the state, received housing assistance, county officials said. The experience resulted in St. Mary's enacting a relocation plan for mobile-home owners.

A need for cheap housing

For years, there has been increasing interest in development along the Route 1 corridor in Howard, where there is a concentration of mobile home parks.

As a result, Robey and some of his colleagues who represent Howard have tried for a couple of years to gain some protections for mobile-home owners. The most recent attempt would have required park owners to notify residents of their plans to sell and give the residents the first right of refusal on the property.

"There are few forms of moderately priced homes available," Robey said. "We need these communities. This is where our clerks in the grocery stores live. Many are retired people; they work on our nails. They are people who can't afford a \$400-a-month condo fee."

Robey knows firsthand the need that mobile home parks fill for those unable to find affordable living for their families.

He owned a mobile home in the late 1960s when he was a rookie police officer, earning \$5,000 a year. He said that he had a family and "couldn't afford anything else."



A resident mows his lawn in the Deep Run mobile home park in Elkridge. Mobile home owners do not own the land under their homes. (Michael S. Williamson/the Washington Post)