

Delegation approves mobile-home bill: Residents would have a better chance of buying the land under their homes

By Larry Carson, The Baltimore Sun
8 February 2008

Feb. 8--Mobile-home park residents in Howard County have a better chance of buying the land under their homes rather than be evicted for redevelopment, in the wake of a unanimous vote by the local delegation to the General Assembly.

Despite last-minute questions by an attorney for the Deep Run Mobile Home Park in Elkridge, the legislators voted Wednesday to approve a bill that would give park residents a right of first refusal if a park owner decides to sell. Park residents typically own their homes, but not the lots on which the homes sit.

The vote came during the county delegation's weekly meeting in Annapolis.

Soaring land values along the U.S. 1 corridor, where the parks are, have led four to close in recent years, leaving residents looking for a place to live. Eight parks remain. Residents have complained of hardships that include older homes that cannot be moved and scarcity of places to relocate newer ones. Residents often are lower-income working families or retirees.

County officials have rezoned land along U.S. 1 to promote redevelopment, but they also worry about the loss of lower-cost housing when parks close.

"It was a unanimous vote," said Hector R. Rodriquez, lead organizer for **People Acting Together in Howard**, a church- and community-based grass-roots organization pushing for the measure. "You can't help but feel good about that. It's a great culmination to a year's worth of work."

"Hallelujah," said Democratic Del. Guy Guzzone after the vote on a bill that has been debated and reviewed for months. The delegation adopted an amendment requiring proof of park owners' compliance before allowing the deed transfer.

Pending approval by the General Assembly, local officials hope to avoid situations such as what happened at the former Ev-Mar Mobile Home Park in Savage, where a legal battle continues long after the park closed and the land was sold.

Kalvin and Elizabeth Evans, who bought a new double-wide home and moved to Ev-Mar just months before finding out it would close, were forced into bankruptcy, Calvin Evans said. The family of eight lived in a tent for a time, he said, and their home was sold at auction for a fraction of what they owed on it.

"When money is the issue and there's land up for grabs, the human being is the last on the list to be taken care of," Evans said. "It's been tough and difficult and frustrating at times."

Sang Oh, attorney for Deep Run's owners, said there is no plan to close the park or sell the land, just west of Interstate 95, but he suggested different language for the bill that would give residents a "right of first offer." He said Deep Run owners are worried the law could give residents too much control over a potential sale.

Legislators decided to approve the bill as written, however, suggesting that it could be amended later, if necessary. Rodriguez said the bill his group supported was based on laws in New Jersey, New Hampshire and Florida, where residents have formed co-ops and bought parks.

In other action Wednesday, the delegation rejected a bill sponsored by Sen. Allan H. Kittleman designed to give a utility credit to residents served by public water but not sewerage. Residents who get either service pay for both with one fee, called an ad valorem charge. Kittleman wants to enable the county to charge less to residents who get water only.

The Ulman administration opposed the change, fearing it eventually would undermine the financing system for the self-supporting utility system by parceling out more and more exceptions.

"If we start this, we're going to have to go back and figure out the whole financial system," James M. Irvin, the public works director, told the delegation. Budget Director Raymond S. Wacks said the county does not separate water from sewerage charges, and that residents pay for many services they don't use, such as schools.

Kittleman said after the party-line vote that his bill would enable the county to enact the tax break if officials wanted to, not require reductions in the fees.

"I'm very disappointed that the county executive chose to object to legislation that would give the county the opportunity to take the tax credit," he said.
