

Mobile Home Advocates Renew Push for Land Law; Measure would allow residents first chance to buy lots they rent if sale is imminent

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Advocates for Howard County mobile home park residents are renewing a push for a law that would give them the first chance to buy the land under their homes if a sale is imminent.

The leaders of **People Acting Together in Howard**, a church-based community organizing group affiliated with the BUILD coalition in Baltimore, are preparing to meet Monday with Gov. Martin O'Malley to get his support for a possible statewide bill in next year's General Assembly session.

Higher land values are pushing park owners across the country to sell their land to developers, displacing hundreds of working people with modest incomes and retirees who for years have enjoyed spacious, affordable homes on lots they rent. State law requires at least one year's notice of a park closing, but mobile homes are often too old to move, and relocation lots are scarce. Park residents typically own their units, but not the land under them.

"Some of the most affordable housing in Howard County is where you live," the Rev. Carletta Allen of Howard's Locust United Methodist Church in Simpsonville told a group of 150 park residents and members of the group PATH at an Aug. 28 meeting at Deep Run Elementary school, next to the Deep Run Mobile Home Park in Elkridge.

Four of Howard's 12 mobile home parks have closed during this decade, and only the economic slowdown is slowing the trend.

William Kosman, a resident of the sprawling Deep Run Mobile Home Park near Interstate 95 and Route 175, said his family can't move from its three-bedroom, 1,800-square-foot home because of medical bills. He has a child who suffered brain damage from an asthma attack.

"This is the only place in Howard County we can afford to live," he said.

Amy Lamke, another Deep Run resident, said she bought a used mobile home there for herself and her daughter after a divorce. She paid off the house in three years, she said, but is worried about the future.

"I have a nagging fear I will open a letter that says we have to move. I would be forced to abandon my home and lose my money," she said, crying.

"We have a grace period from a downturn in the housing market," PATH volunteer Wendell Thompson told the group. "It's time [that] we can use wisely to protect our future," he added.

The push comes months after a similar mobile home park residents' rights bill applying only to Howard County received virtually unanimous support from the county legislative delegation and the full House of Delegates, but the measure was never taken up by the state Senate. PATH leaders blame mobile home park owners for defeating the measure.

"I'm still not sure today what the problem was," state Sen. James N. Robey told the crowd at Deep Run Elementary.

"You never really know what forces are working against you," Senate Majority Leader Edward J. Kasemeyer told the crowd in the stuffy school cafeteria. "It's possible someone worried that it had statewide application."

Both senators, along with Del. Steven J. DeBoy, all Democrats, pledged to work for the bill's passage again next year, whether as a local Howard County bill or a statewide measure.

"We will work very hard in 2009 to try to bring a successful bill out," DeBoy said.

Cynthia Marshall, an organizer for the Industrial Areas Foundation, PATH's national parent group that was founded by the late community organizer Saul Alinsky, said a bolder political strategy is needed.

"We need a powerful ally," she said, explaining why the group wants to talk with O'Malley.

Marshall said she has been working recently in Montgomery County, where apartment renters already have the right to come together to try to buy their buildings before any sale to a developer. Mobile home residents in Delaware and other states also have the right to buy their parks in the same way, she said.

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