

Doug Miller: Mobile home legislation

Activists clear a path to keep one variety of affordable housing affordable

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The prolonged downturn in the housing market and resulting slowdown in development have done little to ease the fears of those who own their homes but don't own the land on which they sit.

Mobile-home parks have been vanishing from the landscape as owners sell them off to developers. When that happens, the people in the trailers are faced with the prospect of huge moving expenses or even losing their homes altogether.

Moving a mobile home can cost up to \$10,000, and most parks won't even take a trailer that's more than 10 years old, according to Cynthia Marshall, the lead organizer for People Acting Together in Howard (PATH).

Leaders from this collection of county religious congregations, affiliated with the nationwide Industrial Areas Foundation, got together with politicians May 23 to celebrate the passage of state legislation that will give people forced to move their trailers some much needed help.

With affordable housing at a premium, especially in high-priced places like Howard County, local officials have a keen interest in helping mobile-home residents stay in those homes. Howard has 10 mobile-home parks on 210 acres that hold nearly 1,200 units housing about 3,000 people, according to county government spokesman Kevin Enright.

Amy Lamke related to me a story that happened three years ago in St. Mary's County. A park with just 80 mobile homes closed. The residents, most of them poor, got nothing but an order to vacate the premises.

"These people went scrambling to the local social service agency, and the county had to reach into another fund to help them," she said. "It cost the county a half million dollars. And this was a small park. Imagine what would happen with a larger one."

Lamke, a price analyst for BJ's Wholesale Club who lives in the Deep Run Mobile Home Park in Elkridge, worked for two years on PATH's lobbying effort.

They came up short last year, but in this year's session, the General Assembly passed a bill -- sponsored in the Senate by James Robey and in the House of Delegates by James Malone -- that requires trailer-park owners with more than 38 lots to pay residents 10 months' rent when they close their facilities. That works out to an average of roughly \$5,000, Marshall said.

Lamke came to the fight with no special expertise, but her flexible work schedule did allow her to attend hearings and negotiating sessions. When PATH met with the group representing the owners of the state's larger mobile-home parks, she was unnerved to find its president was none other than Deep Run owner Mark Wieman, her landlord.

"That scared the dickens out of me," she recalled.

But she soon found these business people, at least, were ready to be reasonable.

"They wanted to know what the bottom line would be," so that they could factor that cost into the prospective sale price of their land, Lamke said.

The Rev. Gerard Bowen also took a strong role in the lobbying effort. The pastor at St. Augustine Church, in Elkridge, was surprised to learn how many church members live in trailers or have family who do.

The push for this legislation was the right thing to do in any event, "but when it involves your parishoners, it gives you more ownership," he said. "This is not somebody else's problem, it's here."