



Legal Services and Nonprofits Partner to Save Mobile Home Park Housing



By Jaimie Ross

“Mobile home parks are an essential element of providing affordable housing in the state;”

so says Senate Bill 1016 and its identical House companion, HB 513, wending its way through the 2010 session.

Mobile home owners residing in investor owned parks are in a precarious and vulnerable position. Even in today’s down market, they

continue to lose their homes as the park owners sell the land for some other more profitable type of land use or a use that better serves other local government or private sector development plans. (see sidebar below) Many are living in mobile homes too old to be moved, and consequently face homelessness when their park closes.

The best way to preserve mobile home parks is for a mission based nonprofit organization, or community land trust to purchase the park. Alternatively, the residents can

convert the park from an investor owned park to a resident owned park. Working in tandem, public interest lawyers, nonprofit affordable housing developers, and nonprofit training and technical assistance providers, just may be able to save some of these parks for the people who live there. The following are a few current examples.



By Christine Allamano

According to Shirley Taylor Prakelt, former Housing and Community Development Director for the Town of Davie, (now retired) "Davie saw approximately 925 families (constituting almost 3,000 residents) lose their homes in the Palma Nova Mobile Home Park due to a government plan to incorporate the park into a Regional Activity Center. Many families occupying older mobile homes which could not be moved, found themselves homeless.



Shirley Taylor Prakelt

We also saw the Seminole Tribe of Florida empty out the Stirling Road Mobile Home Park (non-sovereign land) causing the permanent and involuntary displacement of 65 long-term Davie families. Many elderly residents had lived there over 25 years; and, sadly, their mobiles which aged in place, could not be moved. Again, the majority of these families ended up homeless, living in tents, garages, or in overcrowded situations; and, the vacant site is now used by the Seminoles as overflow parking for special events at their Hard Rock Hotel and Casino.”



The Escambia County nonprofit BRACE is acquiring a mobile home park in which 31 of the 38 rental units will serve households at 50% AMI.

BRACE plans on networking with Catholic Charities, Salvation Army Escaro Coalition for the Homeless, and other agencies providing case management to the families.

Since many current mobile homes will need to be replaced, BRACE is applying to the “Federal Surplus Property” program. If their project meets the program, they could purchase FEMA trailers for simple shipping costs.



The Heritage Oaks Mobile Home Park – Nonprofit Purchase Using NSP Funds

One of the most exciting mobile home park preservation deals that the Florida Housing Coalition has been involved with is Heritage Oaks in Escambia County. This 33 unit park is being saved by a nonprofit using NSP funds to purchase the foreclosed property, make needed infrastructure repairs and bring in replacement mobile homes for those that are unsafe. In fact BRACE, the nonprofit developer, is planning to increase the number of mobile homes on site to 50, not only preserving this essential housing, but providing additional manufactured housing for families in need.

But before BRACE could begin this preservation effort, North Florida Center for Equal Justice had responded to the emergency of utility cutoffs after the property manager took the lease payments but never paid the utility bills. The public interest lawyers organized the residents and negotiated the reinstatement of the utilities so that the residents were not forced out of their homes.

The investor owner of the park abandoned the property and Escambia County, using approximately \$900,000 in NSP funds, facilitated the purchase of the foreclosed property by BRACE, a 501c(3) with hurricane recovery experience. The Florida Housing Coalition has been providing

technical assistance to BRACE to build their capacity for development and management of an income restricted mobile home park.

Hollywood Mobile Home Park – Exploring Resident Ownership

It is not often that you see a mobile home park chosen as an example of a city’s cultural heritage, but photographs of Hollywood Mobile Home Park in St. Petersburg are on display on the walls of the St. Petersburg History Museum. Many residents believe that this park, founded in the 1950s, is the oldest remaining mobile home park in the City. More than 200 mobile homes are still located at the park site on 4th Street North. These mobile homes are a vital source of unsubsidized affordable housing for seniors, the disabled, veterans, and the working poor, and provide easy access to the rest of the city and to Tampa. With lot rents of \$330.00 per month, a home in Hollywood rents for less than half of the HUD fair market rent of a one bedroom apartment in Tampa Bay.

But the size of the park’s acreage and its location – surrounded by upscale retail and new housing constructed during the real estate bubble – also make the park vulnerable to redevelopment. 1000 Friends of Florida put the park residents in touch with FMO Conversion Services (a service of the Florida Mobile Home Owner’s Association) to assist



Above, one of the interior streets in the Hollywood Mobile Home Park in St Petersburg Florida.

At far left, is a proud Veteran, posing in front of his mobile home in the Hollywood Mobile Home Park, after returning home from a VA meeting.

Above, left, Jennifer Tobin, President of FMO Conversion Services and Vicky Krentz, Realtor with FMO Conversion Services explains the step by step what it takes for residents to purchase their mobile home park. FMO Conversion Services will travel throughout Florida to assist with conversion from investor to resident owned parks. Jen@fmo.org 727/535/5125

the mobile home park homeowners association prepare an offer to purchase the park from the current owners. If they are successful in purchasing the property using a cooperative form of home ownership, they would then have achieved their goal of protecting one of the last sources of unsubsidized affordable housing in St. Petersburg, and an important part of the community's heritage.

Southern Comfort Mobile Home Park

At the other end of Pinellas County, the residents of another 200 mobile homes in Southern Comfort Mobile Home Park ("SOCO") have faced down problems of their own. In the decades since the 1960s when SOCO was established, the living conditions in the park have been allowed to run down at the same time rents have

The Florida Bar Foundation funds a statewide affordable housing project that supports lawyers working exclusively on affordable housing impact work and links those offices around the state with other resources such as the Affordable Housing Program at 1000 Friends of Florida and the Florida Housing Coalition.

climbed progressively higher. The park is often without potable water as the owners continue to let it run off an obsolete septic and well system rather than hook it up to the city and county water and sewer lines nearby. Matters reached a head in the spring of 2009 when a maintenance man employed by the park owner threatened a Hispanic resident with a gun while children were present, and the residents sought legal assistance to curb management abuses and deferred maintenance.

An initial stumbling block – the language barrier – was overcome when Gulfcoast Legal Services enlisted the assistance of the Hispanic Student Bar Association at Stetson Law School so that resident meetings could be held in both English and Spanish. With the assistance of the bilingual law students, the residents attended workshops to learn about their legal rights under the Florida Mobile Home Act, formed

Gulfcoast Legal Services Attorney Christine Allamano and law students assist the residents of the Southern Comfort Mobile Home Park to understand their rights and to form a homeowners association.



Photo Courtesy of the St. Petersburg Times

**Florida Statute
723.083
Governmental
action affecting
removal of
mobile home
owners.**

No agency of municipal, local, county, or state government shall approve any application for rezoning, or take any other official action, which would result in the removal or relocation of mobile home owners residing in a mobile home park without first determining that adequate mobile home parks or other suitable facilities exist for the relocation of the mobile home owners.

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a Homeowner's Association, elected a ten-member multicultural board of directors, began holding monthly meetings with guest speakers, formed a Neighborhood Watch, and filed a complaint with the State Department of Business and Professional Regulation when the park owner refused to meet with them about their concerns.

All of this led to a feature article about the residents and their struggles which was published on the front page of the St. Petersburg Times in December 2009. Following publication of the article, the park management agreed to meet with the residents about their concerns. The residents are preparing for their first "negotiating session" with management, which is scheduled for February and will take place in both English and Spanish.

Conclusion

It's heartening to see that an organized effort between public interest

lawyers (and some private sector lawyers working in the public interest), nonprofit developers and technical assistance providers will save some mobile home owners from homelessness. But if the systemic problems of local government failure to ensure that there are adequate sites for mobile homes, (as required by Florida Statute 163.3177, see below) and failure to comply with the intent of statutory protections against land use changes that cause displacement of mobile home park residents (as required by Florida Statute 723.083, at left) are not cured, we will continue to lose this "essential element of providing affordable housing." **HNN**

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Florida Statute 163.3177(f)1d. The provision of adequate sites for future housing, including affordable workforce housing as defined in s. 380.0651(3)(j), housing for low-income, very low-income, and moderate-income families, mobile homes, and group home facilities and foster care facilities, with supporting infrastructure and public facilities.