



Preserving Mobile Home Parks: Don't Forget “Who Brought You To The Dance”

BY JUSTIN JOSEPH

Years ago when Florida was developing its tourism trade, many people came to visit in those long silver, hot dog-looking trailers. Some decided to congregate for longer periods of time, resulting in the birth of “trailer parks”. From those trailer parks, different mobile home communities developed when the homes were never transported back once placed on the land. They became winter homes for northern residents or vacation homes for people who lived elsewhere. Eventually, that style of living became increasingly popular and affordable for more and more people. The parks began to spring up in areas that were rural in nature, such as orange groves and desolate areas, where the land was relatively inexpensive, and open to these communities. After a while, businesses were attracted to those areas, and a support system for the people who lived in them began to develop. Throughout the years the residents of these communities have spent their tax dollars in those communities, have sustained businesses, have been involved in promoting the areas in which they live, and have



been influential in the development of areas around their parks. The parks served as a tax basis for growing and emerging cities and were, in many cases, the beginning communities that developed into the larger urban areas we see today throughout Florida.

These very same mobile home parks that served as a catalyst for their communities are now in danger of extinction, largely due to the highly desirable locations that they were so instrumental in shaping. Everywhere you look in Florida, mobile home parks are being threatened with land use changes. If a mobile home park is located in an aesthetically appealing area, the land on which it sits is being targeted for the placement of townhouses, condominiums, apartments, or residential neighborhoods. If a mobile home park is on a major artery with high traffic counts and visibility, the park is particularly attractive to commercial and retail developers for use as strip centers, shopping malls, office complexes, and other commercial businesses in need of large tracts of

land. In fact, the land has become so valuable that the “highest and best use” for the site is generally considered to be something other than a manufactured home community.



Chapter 723, Florida Statutes, provides the regulations that govern mobile home parks and the relationship between park owners and park residents. Within that chapter it states that a land use change of a mobile home park to some other type of zoning is a sufficient basis to evict all the residents of the park upon six months notice. There are, however, substantial protections for the residents in the form of a right of first refusal to purchase the park, provided there is a homeowner association, and a requirement that the local government make a determination that there are adequate alternative facilities for the relocation of the mobile home park residents. Unfortunately, in practice, these protections have thus far provided little success in preserving mobile home parks. Typically, when a mobile home park owner chooses to change the land use, the end result is that the owners residing in those parks either abandon their units and leave them there or title them over to the park owner as they are driven from the area receiving only a nominal amount of money from the Florida Mobile Home Relocation Corporation.



Sadly, many of those displaced from the mobile home parks are seniors and what might be called “super seniors”, having lived in these parks for the last 20, 30, or 40 years. This is their home, the only home they have, and the only one they can typically afford. In most cases, they do not encumber or request the local community organizations for assistance, because the communities in which they live

have internal resources and support systems, such as self-contained recreational facilities and social events. They have neighbors in their community who look out for each other, by providing meals, transportation, security, and all the things that the frail and elderly need when on their own, without having to ask for support or assistance from the government or the larger community.

It appears that many local governments have lost their conscience and loyalty to these citizens who created the communities for which these commissioners are now responsible. They forgot how the communities were developed; how the area businesses have been supported; how taxes were raised; and the contributions that these people have made to local industries. They don’t consider that when they close these mobile home parks it can take several years for the new residential community to develop, having a deleterious effect on the businesses that surround these communities. They don’t consider the fact that many of the senior citizens that live in these mobile home parks are the ones that work at the local groceries and other stores, laboring for minimum wage. These senior citizens will be difficult to replace. The lack of concern for displacing a person after so many years, particularly in their golden years, shows a profound lack of compassion. In essence, it shows “they forgot who brought them to the dance.” 

Justin G. Joseph is Practitioner Owner in the Law Office of Justin G. Joseph, in Tarpon Springs. He serves as Corporate and Legal counsel for Federation of Manufactured Home Owners of Florida, Inc., and authors a monthly Legal Question and Answer column for the FMO News, among other articles on mobile home issues, mediation, and mobile home park homeowners association matters.

PRESERVING MOBILE HOME PARKS

At the Florida Housing Coalition’s statewide annual conference on September 13, we will have a two-part workshop on Preserving Mobile Home Parks which will include a discussion of enforcing the legal protections for preserving mobile home parks for the residents who live there as well as land use and financing strategies for resident control of mobile home parks. There are approximately 2,600 mobile home parks in Florida, providing affordable housing for an estimated 600,000 Floridians. We cannot afford to lose this affordable housing stock. *Come join the discussion.*