

Grasping for Roots; As Many Mobile Home Parks Face the Bulldozer, Md. Bill Seeks to Give Residents a Shot at Stability

Mary Otto, The Washington Post

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LaMona Linder wanted a place of her own but had nearly nothing to spend.

For \$5,000, the working grandmother managed to buy a battered and neglected yellow double-wide with a leaky roof. Four years ago, she repaired and painted the place, tucked away on a rutted lane in a mobile home park off Route 1 in Elkridge, in eastern Howard County. Then she planted a pear tree.

"This is my home," Linder declared proudly. But, like many mobile home park residents nationwide, she doesn't own the small lot beneath her home. She rents it for \$585 a month. And that, she knows, is a risk.

Mobile home parks have been closing throughout the region in recent years, replaced by more expensive housing, shopping centers and commercial development. Since 2000, six parks have closed in Howard County, displacing hundreds of families. St. Mary's County lost 1,000 mobile homes in the 1990s, according to the 2000 Census. During the same period, Calvert and Charles counties lost more than 100 mobile homes each. South on Route 1 in Fairfax County, a [Wal-Mart](#) now sits on the site of a former mobile park.

But legislation working its way through the Maryland General Assembly might improve the chances of Linder and other residents of Howard County's remaining eight parks to hold onto their affordable communities. With help from a "right of first refusal" bill, the first of its kind in the Washington region to affect mobile homes, Linder and her neighbors are aspiring to join a national resident ownership movement, putting down roots that have been largely lacking since the earliest days of the travel trailers.

The bill, spearheaded by state Del. Guy J. Guzzone (D-Howard) would require the county's mobile home park owners to notify residents if they plan to sell, giving residents a chance to make a collective offer to buy the properties themselves. A park owner would be required to accept the tenants' offer if it was equal to or better than other offers.

"It seems like a fairness issue to me, to give them a shot," Guzzone said. The former Howard County council member got the idea for the measure after he attempted to help residents of Ev-Mar Mobile Village in Laurel hold onto their community. The park closed in 2006.

"In the end, the residents could not come up with the cash," said Guzzone, who acknowledged his bill does not solve that problem. "It's still an issue for the residents to pull together the financial resources required."

Linder, 69, makes \$23,000 a year as a field technician, counting vehicles at intersections for a traffic consultant. Many of her neighbors are working poor families or seniors living on small or fixed incomes.

In Howard, where the average single-family home sells for more than \$485,000, Linder sees her place at Capitol Mobile Home Park as the best chance she will ever have at homeownership. An affordable-housing task force estimated the county has a shortage of 20,000 housing units for households earning less than \$50,000 a year.

Yet Hector R. Rodriguez, an organizer for the interfaith community organization **People Acting Together in Howard** County, sees a collective buying power in Linder and her neighbors, whom he has helped to organize around the right-of-first refusal bill in recent months. They pay rent, after all, he said.

"It could be tough but not inconceivable that they could become the masters of their own destiny," Rodriguez said.

Linder and her neighbors have been working to get ready for that possibility, forming a neighborhood association and holding meetings, even though there's been no indication that the owners of Capitol Mobile Home Park are considering selling.

The owners of the park did not return calls seeking a response to the proposed bill or information on the company's plans for the mobile park.

At a hearing last week before the Howard delegation, an attorney for the county's largest park, Deep Run in Elkridge, said that he supported the concept of giving residents the right to make the first offer on a park but that he was concerned provisions in the bill might complicate or delay a sale. Delegates said they would consider amending the measure at a later time to address such issues but approved the bill, which will continue to move through the legislative process.

If the bill becomes law, it will be the first of its kind for the Washington region. Resident ownership, however, is at work in other places. Out of an estimated 50,000 mobile home parks across the country, roughly 700 have been turned into resident-controlled corporations, similar to condominium associations. They are collectively owned and run by the homeowners, said Paul Bradley, vice president of the New Hampshire Community Loan Fund, which has helped residents in dozens of mobile home parks there acquire and run their communities.

"The loan fund helps low-income homeowners act like deep-pocketed investors," Bradley said. This spring, a new nonprofit, ROC USA, currently housed at the loan fund and led by Bradley, will begin providing technical and financial assistance to mobile home park residents nationwide.

If their 119-lot property goes up for sale, Linder and other community leaders at Capitol Mobile Home Park might have a chance to take advantage of that help. In the meantime, life is changing in small ways for the better. Residents have held a cleanup day and gotten potholes repaired.

Their new neighborhood association recently elected officers, including a president, Sherry Cordle.

Cordle said that in the past, some of her neighbors have feared getting involved or speaking up for improvements because they only rent their lots.

But a better community takes commitment, she tells them. "Don't be afraid."

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