

Residents take over mobile-home park with government help

LORNA THACKERAY Of The Gazette Staff | Posted: Tuesday, September 22, 2009 10:35 pm

After four months of living in campers, motels and rentals, residents of Mountain Springs Villas Mobile Home Park in Red Lodge may be days away from moving home.

But it won't be the same old neighborhood. Gone are the dirt streets and ugly power lines. Homes no longer sit haphazardly on cluttered lots, their foundations resting on bare ground. And when residents pay their monthly \$235 for a space, the money goes not to a landlord, but to the residents' association to which they all belong.

"Oh, it's beautiful compared to what it was," said Tami Hoth, one of the residents who helped organize rebirth of the 30-unit mobile-home park. "It was kind of the forgotten part of town."

During a flurry of construction this summer, streets were paved, curbs and gutters installed, concrete foundations poured and sewer, water and utility lines were buried. Eleven of the 26 resident families will be moving into new mobile homes, 10 of them thanks to the efforts of District 7 Human Resources and Development Council, Hoth said. Only four spaces in Mountain Springs are vacant.

And it didn't cost the city of Red Lodge a dime, said Mayor Betsy Scanlin, who is almost as excited about the project as the residents. Grants and loans covered the approximately \$3.4 million in costs with a little in-kind help from the city.

Mountain Springs is an important development for a resort town where low-to-moderate-income housing is scarce. Real estate agent Jim Smedsrud of Coal Creek Realty said the average price of the 25 residential sales so far in 2009 is \$207,636. The median price is \$199,250.

Hoth said preserving affordable housing was a key element. A goal of the project was that 80 percent of the residents have incomes 80 percent or less of the median income for Red Lodge. About 95 percent of the residents meet that criterion, Hoth said. She said the median income for a family of two is less than \$40,000.

"These are people that are an essential part of our work force," Scanlin said. "They live here year-round. They raise their kids here."

Three years ago, their neighborhood was threatened when the landowner decided to sell the property. Scanlin, who was running for city council, campaigned in the neighborhood and heard the residents' concern about finding reasonably priced housing elsewhere.

"Does anybody want to buy this park and turn it into a resident-owned community?" she asked. The community response was "We can't do that - can we?"

"We set up a meeting a few days later," Scanlin said. "Within a week, we had a buy/sell with a year to get the financial backing."

Getting the grants

NeighborWorks, a nonprofit housing program headquartered in Great Falls, and HRDC "really started us on the right track," Hoth said.

NeighborWorks hired Flynn Consulting of Helena as grant writers. Three grants resulted, Hoth said. The first was \$450,000 to help buy the property. A \$15,000 grant paid for planning and a preliminary plat. A \$500,000 grant covered infrastructure improvement including paving, water and sewer and underground electric and gas lines.

A private loan and a Montana Board of Housing loan helped pay for the rest, said project administrator Julie Jones, owner of

Single Tree Consulting in Bridger. Residents were also able to find help through the Montana Homeownership Network and the U.S. Housing and Urban Development's HOME Investment Partnership Program, she said.

The best part of the project is that residents will not have to worry again about a landlord selling the ground out from under them, Scanlin said. They will have ownership through the association.

"They are going to have equity in their property now," the mayor said. "I'm just delighted."

Residents moved out of their homes four months ago as the major construction phase began. At the time, they anticipated returning in two months, but it didn't happen that quickly. That was a hardship on some, said Hoth, who spent the summer with her husband in a 22-foot camper.

"One family had to move a lot - about seven times," she said.

A Community Development Block Grant helped find families places to live and pay for their temporary housing, Jones said. The grant also paid for some of the construction work.

Last Thursday, residents toured their new neighborhood with an HDRC representative to make sure everything was ready. On Tuesday, the final plat for the neighborhood was to be presented to the City Council for approval.

"Once that's done, we're only a few steps from moving back in," Hoth said.

Jones said that if City Council approves the plat, residents could begin unpacking in their homes by the weekend.



Council OKs plat for mobile home park

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The Red Lodge City Council on Tuesday unanimously approved the final plat for the Mountain Springs Villas Mobile Home Park, opening the door for its 26 resident families to move back into their homes as early as Wednesday after four months of living elsewhere.

The project to make the park into a resident association - instead of landlord-based rental properties - and replace or improve the homes in it was about three years in the making, Red Lodge Mayor Betsy Scanlin said.

On Wednesday, the water was turned on and families began moving their belongings back home.

Grants and loans from a number of groups and organizations provided about \$3.4 million in costs for the project, which included replacing eleven mobile homes, paving streets, installing curbs and gutters, installing sewer, water and utility lines and pouring concrete foundations.

The city council passed the plat with several conditions, Scanlin said, including the need for an infrastructure performance bond to assure upkeep at the park.

The first of its kind in the state, the mobile home park, which houses mostly low-to-moderate income families who live in Red Lodge year-round, is now owned by the people who live there.

"Now, they have a stake in the town," Scanlin said. "It is one way to help create stability."