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Olympia mobile home park residents become owners

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

OLYMPIA, Wash, -- The residents of an Olympia trailer park, facing eviction and likely the loss of what they had invested in their homes, are now about to own the place.

Ten months after being told to pay $95,000 each for their lots or leave, the 30 residents of the College Street Mobile Home Park formed a cooperative and raised $1.7 million to buy the property with the help of federal, state and county grants and low-interest loans.

Participants are expected to sign off on the deal Sept. 12.

Without the deal, "they would have had to move out and move their homes, probably to the dump," said Ishbel Dickens, a public-interest lawyer with Columbia Legal Services of Seattle. "It's a win-win for everyone. The majority still have mortgages on their homes. They would have lost all their investments and still have had to find a place to live."

The experience brought neighbors together as "one big, huge family," resident Carol Calkins said.

"It's been a real joy to participate in this kind of experience," Calkins said.

Now renamed Hidden Village, it's the first in the state to benefit from a new manufactured-home program established by the state's Housing Trust Fund. The former owners are also the first to receive a tax waiver that was approved by the Legislature this year to provide more incentives for park owners to sell to residents rather than to developers.

The legislation follows exploding land values that led to the closure of hundreds of trailer and manufactured-home parks nationwide as landowners cashed in by selling to developers. In Washington, 89 mobile home parks were closed between 2002 and 2006, The Olympian newspaper reported.

"So many manufactured-home parks are closing around the state that we're losing valuable affordable housing," said Eileen Piekarz, who represents a nonprofit from Reno that helped residents organize their push to buy the park. "It's more cost-effective to save this housing than to build new affordable housing."

State officials are now looking at Hidden Village as a model that can be replicated in other parts of the state.

"It's a wonderful success story," Dickens said. Owners get a fair market value for their property and community residents get to continue living in their homes."

Information from: The Olympian, http://www.theolympian.com/