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Mobile home park residents become park owners

Residents of three parks buy the land underneath their homes

By CHERYL SCHWEIZER
Herald staff writer

MOSES LAKE — The people who are now on the board of directors at the Lakeview Terrace mobile home park admitted they were skeptical at first.

Of course, the park residents were facing a dilemma — their park and two others were up for sale. But Lakeview Terrace resident Mary Laughlin detailed her reaction to the people who showed up with a possible solution.

"I thought they were nuts," she said.

The people were from the Northwest Cooperative Development Center, and they proposed that the residents buy the property. It took a lot of work to make it happen, but the residents became the owners in late June.

People who live in mobile home parks "are in a unique position because they own the home but not the land," said Eric Bowman, a cooperative development specialist with the center. Mobile homes - and mobile home parks - matter because they are an important source of unsubsidized affordable housing, Bowman said.

But there's an "inherent insecurity to living in a mobile home park," Bowman said. Parks get sold, and space rent gets increased - and sometimes the whole park is shut down for redevelopment.

Lakeview Terrace, Ponderosa and Cascade Village, all in Cascade

Valley, make up 121 mobile home sites, he said. They were all owned by one property owner, Bowman said.

And they were for sale, and part of Bowman's job is to help mobile home owners in that situation.

But the residents weren't sure these guys knew what they were doing. "We just really questioned. We thought, 'there's something wrong here,'" said Linda Eslick, who's on the board at Lakeview Terrace. "They had to win our trust. And it took a while."

"There was a lot of doubt," said Gary Frazier, who lives in Cascade Village. Park residents were being asked to take on a \$1.5 million purchase. "That's a large figure to wrap your head around," Eslick said. "It's a lot of money and most of us were very skeptical."

The residents would be responsible for enforcing park rules, adjudicating disputes, keeping the water and sewer systems functioning. If

something goes wrong at 3 a.m., the residents will be responsible for addressing it. Chris Deal, who's on the Lakeview Terrace board, summed it up.

"Scary," Deal said.

"It's a very big step," said Tracy Johnson, a resident of Cascade Village.

But the benefits would be big, if the residents could do it. Nobody could sell the park out from under them. "We just wanted site security," Frazier said. "We wanted the assurance we could stay in this park."

"The security it brings when it's

The neighbors all of a sudden are taking more pride in their homes.

— Tracy Johnson

Cascade Village Board Member

resident owned - it's good stuff," said Cathy Haigh, president of ROC (resident owned community) USA. The program started about 30 years ago in New Hampshire, she said.

The residents would control their space rent. That was one of the things worrying Frank Thomas, now president of the Lakeview Terrace association, when he thought about somebody else buying the property. "We were scared the owner would jack (space rent) clean out of sight," he said. Owning the park meant that wouldn't happen.

"We would be our own bosses," Frazier said. "Everyone is an owner in it," Jordan said. They control who moves into the park.

"I saw the potential, as well as several of us did, of making it reality," Jordan said. Over time the residents became more confident of making it work. They formed a corporation and sold shares to each park resident.

Rent was raised slightly - at Cascade Village it went up by \$25 per month - to provide enough to pay back the loan and build reserves for repairs, Bowman said.

The residents could back out right up until the time they signed the documents.

"We're obligated, right?" Thomas said.

"We are now," Deal said.

And they plunged in to learn what

they will need to know about financing a large purchase and running a mobile home park. "We're trying to learn how to do it ourselves," Eslick said.

They've hired somebody to take care of the wells, Frazier said, and teach some of the residents how to do the necessary water quality tests.

They've also hired a property manager to help them out, Thomas said. "We're still learning how to answer questions," Frazier said.

Each park has a board, which meets monthly or semi-monthly. Somebody from Northwest Cooperative Development Center will attend all or most board meetings for three years, Bowman said.

He's been impressed by the residents he's met, he said. "I'm always amazed at the skill that sort of comes out of the woodwork," he said.

The purchase has had an impact in the parks as well. "A lot of remodeling going on," Jordan said. "The neighbors all of a sudden are taking more pride in their homes." Residents are taking better care of their property, mowing and weeding and generally cleaning up, he said.

Thomas said he met neighbors he'd never known before throughout the process, and the whole park has changed. "This has made us not neighbors, but friends," he said.



Cheryl Schweizer/Columbia Basin Herald

The board of directors at Lakeview Terrace listens to a report from secretary Mary Laughlin (right). Board members are (from left) Chris Deal, president Frank Thomas, vice-president Mary Croce and Linda Eslick. Treasurer Joyce Lambert is partially visible behind Laughlin.

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