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Standoff at Nassau's Last Trailer Park



Phil Marino for The New York Times

FIGHTING EVICTION Residents of Syosset's trailer park own their homes, but not the land underneath. They have sued the developer who bought it.

By VALERIE COTSALAS
Published: January 13, 2008

SYOSSET

IN a cozy paneled 12-foot-wide mobile home in [Nassau County's](#) last trailer park, Marcy Rappaport and Barbara Pedote watched two boys as they sat together watching television.

The boys — Ms. Rappaport's 7-year-old son, Josh, and Ms. Pedote's 12-year-old grandson, Niko — attend public schools in Syosset, one of the highest-rated districts in Nassau. But they may not be able to do so much longer if the forces of Long Island's real estate market and a disapproving local public have their way.

Last April, a developer bought the four acres under the mobile home park, and an adjacent two acres with retail shops and a restaurant, for \$9.4 million. Since then residents of the park have received eviction notices, which they are fighting in court, and last month they turned down the developer's cash offer to move out.

"We're not leaving," Ms. Pedote, 62, said. "Where are we going to go around here, with no money?"

As in most such communities, residents own their mobile homes but lease the land under them. The Syosset trailer park "is the only one we have, and it's in an area that is prime," said Connie Lassandro, the director of housing and homeless services in Nassau, which is trying to help residents relocate.

The park is nestled behind stores lining Jericho Turnpike, a major commercial highway that runs nearly the full length of Long Island.

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In recent years, gated communities of expensive town houses and single-family homes have sprung up on this stretch of the turnpike, including Stone Hill at Muttontown, a development of luxury homes on a former Gold Coast estate, where prices start at around \$2 million. A few miles east is the Preserve at Woodbury, a collection of attached brick town houses, some with elevators and screening rooms, that start at \$1.4 million.

Ms. Pedote said she paid “my whole savings” of \$55,000 for her home in September 2006, and cannot find another place to live for the \$850 a month in rent and utilities that she now pays.

Ms. Rappaport, 40, who pays \$650 a month in rent and utilities, bought her two-bedroom unit opposite Ms. Pedote’s for \$85,000, she said, and has spent another \$20,000 renovating the kitchen and floors and adding a shed.

She was previously an itinerant renter who had moved 22 times, but said the trailer park was a place with good schools where she could finally “put down roots.”

The tenants association formed by residents has hired a lawyer and filed suit against the developers, asking the court to set aside the sale of the park.

“These homes represent the most significant asset they have,” said the lawyer, Elliot Schlissel. He added that many of the mobile homes are on permanent foundations or so old that they cannot be moved, so residents “will lose their homes.”

STP Associates, the developer that bought the parcel, has no specific plans for it yet, according to Larry Rush, one of the firm’s investors.

But if the encompassing town of Oyster Bay allows it, STP might build a series of attached homes with separate retail stores along Jericho Turnpike, Mr. Rush said. The site is zoned for commercial development.

Mr. Rush said his firm had originally offered the tenants a one-year lease, to give them time to relocate. Tenants who stayed for six months of that year would have to pay a higher rent: \$750 a month; those who stayed the second six months would have to pay \$1,000. (Current rents range from \$500 to \$650 a month, he said.)

In December, STP added a \$500,000 settlement to that offer, to be used in any way the tenants chose. In return, the residents would drop their lawsuit and agree either to remove their mobile homes or to transfer them to the developer to be removed.

The residents turned down the offer, Mr. Schlissel said. Ms. Rappaport said each homeowner would have received less than \$10,000 under the deal. That is nearly what they would pay in rent over the next year.

In any case, Mr. Rush says the settlement money is no longer on the table, as he is now fighting the tenants’ lawsuit. “I understand that it’s not a good situation for them, and we want to be conscientious about it,” Mr. Rush said. “But I didn’t create this situation. I didn’t tell people to buy a trailer on a piece of land they don’t own.”

He added that he was not obligated by law to compensate the mobile home residents at all, but would like to help them relocate.

One problem, housing advocates say, is that New York housing laws provide little or no protection for mobile-home owners.

State Assemblymen Marc S. Alessi and Fred W. Thiele Jr., who represent Suffolk districts that have mobile home parks, have proposed two bills to address the issue.

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One would require that tenants be given 60 days to buy the land under their homes before it can be sold to a third party. The second would create a mediation process to prevent rent increases by landowners seeking to force tenants out.

But even if those laws were passed in the next legislative session in Albany, they would most likely be too late for Syosset, Mr. Thiele said.

Residents' only hope, they say, is to buy out the developer. "We want the park," Ms. Rappaport said. "That's our primary goal."

Nassau County officials and the Long Island Housing Partnership, a nonprofit organization that collects money to help build housing priced below market rates, are studying how that might be done.

Mr. Thiele said that in the 1990s, residents of the Parkview trailer park in Flanders, on the East End, were ultimately able to buy their land with loans and a grant from the [New York State](#) Housing Finance Agency. But the Suffolk County law that gave them the right to do so has since been struck down.

Residents of another park in Three Mile Harbor, [East Hampton](#), also bought their land, and some owners of oceanfront mobile homes in Montauk Shores have done the same.

But even if the residents could muster enough money in loans and grants to make a fair offer, "there has to be a willing seller," said Diana Weir, the vice president of the housing partnership. If the developer is not willing to sell, "there's no deal."

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