**Preserving Our Manufactured Housing Communities**

Manufactured housing communities—known by many as mobile home parks—are one of the largest sources of unsubsidized affordable housing in Washington State. Manufactured homes provide affordable housing for about 500,000 people, or approximately 8% of our residents, many of them elderly. But this great affordable housing choice has become a crisis in our state. Communities are closing at an alarming rate—particularly in areas where the squeeze is on in terms of available land for commercial development.

This crisis is a complicated story to tell. There are clearly some conflicts between park owners and park residents, but there are very few “bad guys.” In fact, this story has a great many heroes. I’m going to talk about several of them and their success stories in this issue of *My View*.

**Inside this Issue**

- Preserving our manufactured housing communities..................1
- Parks closing at an alarming rate ......................2
- Heroes—and success stories ......................2
- SOS: Not going down without a fight ..................3
- Keys to success ..................................4
- Securing the two parks in Lynnwood ..................5
- A good deal ..................................5
- A huge conundrum .................................6
- One of the biggest affordable housing providers in the state ..................................6
- Impacts of a closing park: Two personal stories 8
- Under scrutiny: Washington State’s Urban Growth Boundaries ..........................10
- Promising developments in Wenatchee ..........................10
- A change in attitude .................................11
Preserving our manufactured housing communities

Parks closing at an alarming rate

In Washington State, approximately 143 communities have closed in the past 15 years, displacing more than 4000 families. Between May 2006 and December 2007, 38 of these communities have closed or will close, pushing out another 1400 households. For the majority of these residents, there’s no place to go. The term “mobile home” is typically a misnomer: many of these homes cannot be moved and will have to be demolished at the homeowner’s expense. Other homeowners, even if their homes can be moved, can’t find another park with room for their home.

While parks continue to close, very few are opening to take their place. This is due to a range of factors but chief among them is the skyrocketing cost of raw land, particularly in the Puget Sound corridor and other areas within the state’s Urban Growth Boundaries (UGBs). Another factor is the negative way manufactured housing communities have been viewed by many municipalities and potential neighbors in the past. Now, however, that attitude may be changing. From the people who make their homes in these parks to elected officials at all levels, from community activists and caring neighbors to local housing authorities (HAs) and park owners, most people involved are working hard to come up with answers to this problem and are working together with good will.

The recent purchase of two manufactured housing parks in Lynnwood, just north of Seattle, with funding from both Snohomish County and the state; and, the voluntary efforts of Wenatchee park owner KamKon to relocate its Ninth Street Mobile Home Park residents to more affordable land, illustrate the potential for finding solutions for other communities that will no doubt be up for closure in the months and years to come. With enough education, willingness to work together, hard work and financial assistance, many communities can be preserved.

Heroes — and success stories

Ishbel Dickens has been advocating for manufactured housing residents for the 20 years that I have known her. She started out as a volunteer collecting signatures on a petition to organize neighbors to try to stop Costco from purchasing a mobile home park in north Seattle (Costco was staved off but the park’s site is now occupied by a Home Depot store). Ishbel’s life’s work has evolved from petition collector to community organizer for the Low Income Housing Institute (LIHI) on manufactured housing issues, to her current role as a passionate champion for the rights of the tenants who live in these communities.

Some years ago, Ishbel went to law school “to have even more tools in the tool kit to be a strong advocate for manufactured homeowners.” Now an attorney with nonprofit Columbia Legal Services, “I have the job of my dreams,” Ishbel says. Her efforts have been essential in organizing park residents who face closures, enlisting the support of municipal leaders, and advocating for tenant rights in the legislature.

Unfortunately, she’s witnessed dozens of closures over the past two decades. “Within city limits, manufactured housing communities are sometimes the largest tracts of raw land,” Ishbel says. She points to countless situations—in both eastern and western Washington—where waterfront properties and other appealing sites have been converted to upscale condos and townhomes. In other cases, commercial development is the culprit: big box stores like Wal-Mart, or shopping malls.

“People seem to think a manufactured housing community is up for grabs. Very little thought is given to the actual homeowners living there.”
Preserving our manufactured housing communities

“We had over 100 people at the city council meeting with only two days’ notice. It was important to show the city that we were united in wanting to save our homes.”

The vast majority of tenants don’t know what rights they have; they often aren’t aware that they only have 12 months’ notice of a park closure—a guarantee required by state law. “We need longer-term leases,” she says. “We need more security.” She cites the predicament of one of her clients, who is being forced to move her home for the third time. “When parks close, most people can’t maintain homeownership. That’s ridiculous. We’re advocating for more homeownership and affordable housing at all levels and yet we’re closing parks. And people are losing their one opportunity to be homeowners.”

Ishbel can point to about 10 manufactured housing parks in our state that have been preserved, thanks in part to her efforts. In 2005, with the help of the City of Winslow as well as concerned citizens on Bainbridge Island, a park was saved and converted to a cooperative. LIHI owns one preserved park; King County Housing Authority owns several. Another nonprofit organization, Manufactured Housing Community Preservationists (MHCP), has saved and maintains four Puget Sound-area parks and parks in Lacey and Tumwater are owned by residents as well.

SOS: Not going down without a fight

Most recently, in March of this year, the ink dried on the purchase of Kingsbury East and Squire, two senior parks in Lynnwood, by the Housing Authority of Snohomish County (HASCO). This is a story of remarkable efforts and partnerships. The preservation effort, says housing authority director Bob Davis, “involved everybody doing things they don’t normally do. When we originally met with both the county and the state last summer, they basically said, ‘no, we can’t do this.’ But they did. It worked. It came together.”

What got the ball rolling were the efforts of the park’s residents. “The homeowners did an amazing job of community organizing,” says Ishbel. “As soon as they knew the park was being sold, they got the politicians involved, at the city, county, and state levels. They mobilized the wider community; the press coverage was fabulous.” Kylin Parks, who lives in Kingsbury East, led the charge. “Kylin volunteered a huge amount of energy and effort,” says Ishbel.

The tenants organized immediately after discovering that their park had been sold to a developer. Kylin recalls that “we said there’s a city council meeting on Monday, let’s get fliers out and pack it in. If we go down, it’s not without a fight. We had over 100 people at the city council meeting with only two days’ notice.” The group quickly formed a homeowners’ association and got 98% of the residents as members. “It was important to show the city that we were united in wanting to save our homes,” she says.
Kylin and others who worked to save Kingsbury East and Squire formed Save Our Seniors’ (SOS) Homes, which is now working on preservation issues with residents in about 10 other parks. “We decided it was our obligation to help others in the same boat to learn from our crash-course expertise,” Kylin says. From her perspective, good communications with park owners might help avert what happened with their park—it was sold before the residents even had a chance to pull together to try to save it. SOS’s philosophy? “Start a friendly, open dialogue with the owner. Get organized, get ready. Have your eyes open.” In addition to SOS, there are two other organizations in the state that are dedicated to tenants’ rights, the Mobile Home Tenants

Keys to success

HASCO’s Bob Davis points to three factors that made the Kingsbury East and Squire parks’ preservation a success.

First, you need a willing seller. Bob hails developer Michael Echelbarger’s cooperative attitude. “If you don’t have a willing seller,” says Bob, “it’s not going to happen. On the policy side, you have people who tell folks either that they can prevent landlords from redeveloping their parks through state law or through local zoning. It’s not true.”

Second, the right strategy is important. Bob says, “My perspective, developed over 20 years, is that you either take the communities into nonprofit ownership—either coop, nonprofit, or public agency—or they go away.” Once the property is publicly owned, it’s important to take steps to preserve the affordability. Otherwise, the housing can lose its affordability through resale when the new owners pay the increased market price.

Finally, the residents have to show commitment. The residents at Kingsbury East and

Squire were a remarkably cohesive group. They showed government officials that preserving their homes was something they really wanted. “At every point,” Bob recalls, “the residents were so motivated, cohesive, and articulate, that everybody who met them was impressed and moved to want to preserve the communities for them.”

Significantly, the residents’ commitment went beyond gathering signatures and testifying to committees. “We required—and the homeowners executed—buyback agreements prior to closing,” Bob says. “They gave up any potential equity they would accrue in return for their parks being saved. This enables us to perpetuate the affordability as we go forward. It was a generous contribution on their part: They called it their legacy.”
Association, and the Mobile Home Owners of America. The three groups, Kylin explains, are attempting to merge. To be successful, “we really need paid staff.” Ishbel is searching for grant funding to hire a paid community organizer for a statewide coalition, similar to Minnesota’s successful All Parks Alliance for Change.

**Securing the two parks in Lynnwood**

Time is of the essence in any real estate transaction. So when Bob Davis heard about the sale of the Kingsbury East and Squire communities, he knew he’d have to act fast if he wanted to preserve them.

He had two advantages right from the beginning. First, the residents were already organized and committed to saving their homes. Second, he already had developed ideas about how to finance a park buyout, because he’d been in discussions with the owner of another park in Snohomish County. As a result, when owner/developer Michael Echelbarger confirmed that he was willing to sell, Davis already had an action plan in place.

But a huge challenge remained. HASCO needed to obtain $9.8 million in financing in order to close the deal. As Bob explains, “theoretically, this should have been impossible because of the way the funding cycles are set up in the state of Washington.” Typically, applicants who approach the Housing Trust Fund (HTF) for grants in the fall have already demonstrated their commitments from local governments. HASCO was able to expedite the process by promising to obtain a contingent loan agreement from Snohomish County.

At the same time, both HASCO and the park residents joined in appealing to Representative Brian Sullivan, who got involved as their advocate in the legislature. In addition, Representative Hans Dunsehee lent his support in his role as chair of the Capital Budget Committee.

As it turned out, the HTF declined the funding, but the legislature approved the full amount of the request, $3.5 million, as a federal HOME allocation, contingent upon the county supplying the balance. HASCO then worked with Snohomish County officials to borrow $2.5 million over a three-year period. The final piece was $3.8 million raised through tax-exempt bond financing; the tenants’ monthly rental fees pay off the interest on this part of the debt.

**A good deal**

With a total cost of $9.8 million to preserve 94 homes, was this transaction an efficient use of resources? Bob says the answer is an emphatic “yes.” While it cost taxpayers approximately $100,000 per home to preserve the two parks, new construction for seniors would probably cost in the neighborhood of $225,000-250,000 per unit.

Bob admits that new construction would be superior in quality and cost the occupants less in rent; but apartment living isn’t for everyone. “Some seniors hate secure elevator buildings,” says Bob. “They want to live in a single-family environment, where they can walk out their own front door. That’s why these folks cling to their communities, even though, physically, the unit they’re going to get is inferior.”

“We’ve got this human misery issue that’s difficult. Somehow we have to find a balance between the private property rights of the park owners and also the needs of these tenants.”

In the final analysis, manufactured housing communities represent a relatively inexpensive solution for a segment of the senior population that values its independence. Taxpayers also got a good secure investment in real property that will hold its value in years to come.
A huge conundrum

Representative Brian Sullivan serves Washington’s 21st District, which includes the northern Puget Sound cities of Edmonds, Lynnwood, Mukilteo, and parts of Mountlake Terrace and Everett. “Just in my district alone, I have 34 manufactured housing parks. The City of Lynnwood has 17 parks. We’ve been working diligently to try to represent these residents well in Olympia—to give all tenants in all manufactured housing units an equal chance,” he affirms.

Toward that end, Brian worked on two bills this last legislative session.

The first bill authorized dollars and tax credits towards financing for the nonprofit purchase of manufactured housing parks, whether residents form their own nonprofit organization or a public entity ultimately owns the park. “We worked on that bill all session, we dropped it late—but what we did get was $4 million carved out of the HTF for the purchase of these parks,” Brian says.

Many people remarked that the HTF was already available for the purchase of manufactured housing parks: they’re not restricted from doing it, so why carve out the $4 million? That’s because the HTF hasn’t been working on it. We wanted a specific carve-out as a minimum amount of money that can be used. We wanted to get staff motivated at CTED and within the HTF to really pay attention to this issue,” he says.

The second bill is HB 1621. “This is a preservation bill which will allow tenants the ability to form an association and will give them 90 days to try to purchase their park under a first right of refusal.” The bill allows a large state excise tax break to the seller if a property is sold to the residents—to encourage manufactured housing park owners to sell to them. The bill didn’t make it out of the finance committee.

“We have a huge conundrum here,” Brian admits. “Manufactured housing park owners can be very compassionate, but when they’re elderly and they want to sell, they don’t want to face the tenants. We’ve got this human misery issue that’s difficult. Somehow we have to find a balance between the private property rights of the park owners and also the needs of these tenants: All they get is a one-year lease. Many of the park tenants in my district are elderly, and it will cost them $12,000 to move their home. For the Puget Sound region, this is one of the last vestiges of affordable housing.”

Brian tells me that these bills are still alive—he’s working with Ishbel, SOS, and other tenants’ rights groups to advocate for passage next year. “This is about preserving affordable housing, taking care of our seniors, maintaining a balance,” he says. “I’m a big supporter of property rights. But when it comes at the expense of people’s health and living conditions, we have to do something to step in and try to provide that balance.”

One of the biggest affordable housing providers in the state

Ken Spencer, executive director of Manufactured Housing Communities of Washington (MHCW), has many nice things
Preserving our manufactured housing communities

Since the end of World War II, manufactured housing communities have served as one of the largest sources of unsubsidized affordable housing in the U.S. There are approximately 1800-2000 of these parks in Washington State. Pictured here is Thomas Place, near Mill Creek in Western Washington.

to say about Brian Sullivan but they share an amicable ‘agree to differ’ stance when representing their constituencies. In Ken’s case, that’s the membership of MHCW, who are many of the park owners and managers across the state. MHCW has more than 500 members who provide some 37,000 spaces, representing approximately one-third of the communities in the state—and nearly one-half of the spaces.

“We’re all interested in the preservation of manufactured housing communities,” Ken says. “And we’re proud of the fact that we’ve financed affordable housing. We’re one of the biggest providers in the state.” Ken points out that his members are under pressure on many fronts. “Many times, communities are trying to force us to close and we have to fight that battle. At the other end is a property rights issue.” From the perspective of MHCW, Ken says, a property may have been maintained for 30 or 40 years as affordable housing, but as the owner nears retirement, the land around it has built up in value so much that it’s no longer the highest and best use of that land.

MHCW is opposed to HB 1621. Ken and his members point to their two major reasons why: The bill presents “a very serious property rights issue,” he affirms. “No buyer will wait in line for the time periods they have in that bill for first right of refusal. It will chase away other legitimate buyers.” Second, MHCW takes issue with the bill’s definition of fair market value. “They would have three people come out to assess the property as a manufactured housing park,” Ken points out. “That might not be highest and best use; a whole category of investment would be taken away from the owners.”

To Ken’s mind, attempts to restrict property rights will ultimately “drive people to take capital out of the industry. Some of our members have said ‘we’ve had it.’ We’ve watched them leave Washington to go somewhere else. There’s clearly a societal benefit to affordable housing. We need it—we need a lot more than we’ve got. But you can’t put the onus on a small group of property owners to provide it.”

I asked Ken what his members see as a remedy to this crisis. “Less restrictive zoning, lower impact fees, municipalities willing to side with us. Hardly anyone is trying to build right now. Instead, lots of municipalities are trying to get rid of us.” South of Seattle, in towns like Burien and Des Moines, he says, “they want to see parks developed into shopping malls, to get a bigger tax base.”

“We also have manufactured housing communities that won’t allow single-wide homes. They’re misapplying legislation that was never meant to apply to our communities.” But currently when a park closes, many single-wide homes are banned from other parks.

Ken’s organization would also like to see better education and preparation for tenants, so that when a property goes up for sale, they’re ready. “My members see qualified resident groups that are willing to buy as a good thing. The real key is for residents to get together and organize ahead of time to arrange financing.” He spoke highly of the consulting program for tenants offered through CTED’s Office of Manufactured Housing.
IMPACTS OF A CLOSING PARK: Two personal stories

Two of the most powerful voices in efforts to save the Ninth Street community in Wenatchee have been those of Molly Littrell and Teresa Zepeda.

Molly Littrell

When Molly was 60, she decided to use her savings to buy her home. She is 71, and has lived at Ninth Street for seven years. “I figured that I would live here for the rest of my life,” Molly says. “I never realized that this trailer court would be sold. No one is really against the fact that the city wants to take advantage of as much of the riverfront property as possible—there’s going to be a lot of very high-priced condos built all along this street.

“Unfortunately my trailer is one of the questionable ones. It’s in good shape, but it had a pitched roof put on, and it’s not clear that it can be moved with that roof on it. I went back to school and graduated with computer skills. I have gone back to work, and I’m not in the same position as many women here who are living alone on Social Security. If my trailer can’t be moved, I would have to have it destroyed.

“I’m really okay with that. I did a lot of work on it, I really would hate to lose it, but I know I’ll be okay. But I’m just one person.

“The big problem is, there just is no available low-income housing. I do have to say the Kamkon people have been extremely nice. Whether or not my trailer can be moved, I hope for the rest of the people here.”
Preserving our manufactured housing communities

Many children live with their families in the Ninth Street Mobile Home Park in Wenatchee. Pictured here, they’re heading to school on a morning in early May.

Teresa Zepeda

Teresa, her husband, and their three children have lived in Ninth Street for four years. They are still paying a mortgage on their manufactured home. One of Teresa’s biggest concerns is that in any move, her kids might be uprooted from their school.

“We feel alone, because we would like to be part of this community,” Teresa says. “My family, we are low income, we don’t have enough money to buy a good, affordable house, safe and secure. It is almost impossible for us. The city is growing up—and that’s great. But we are living here, we are families, we have kids, and this is the only thing we have: our mobile homes. I think and I feel, although we are poor, Wenatchee should have space for us. We are human, too.

“I have noticed that some neighbors are leaving now. If some people have enough money, they can move their homes or buy houses. For the majority of us—we can’t. “The sad thing is we can find a place to put our mobile home closer to the orchards. But I feel we are part of this community, we need the schools, and the services—we would like to be involved in all the things this community has.”
He also brought up the elephant in the room, otherwise known as the Urban Growth Boundaries (UGBs). “The Growth Management Act (GMA) says: here’s a circle we can’t build outside of. So the price of land inside it went through the ceiling. And that’s where most manufactured housing communities are.” Ken spoke of the need for the legislature to take on this crisis by taking a hard look at the UGBs. He stresses that new parks have very little impact: they maintain all their own infrastructure and roads and, for those communities dedicated to seniors 55 and older, schools aren’t an issue either.

“We want to see cooperative legislation,” Ken says. “We’re the ones who provide affordable housing; we wonder sometimes why we’re the ones who are under attack.”

**Under Scrutiny:**
**Washington State’s Urban Growth Boundaries**

Efforts are underway by Senator Bob McCaslin and Rep. Lynn Schindler, who both represent the 4th Legislative District east of Spokane, to take on the issue of UGBs.

“I’ve asked the good Senator—Brian Weinstein, chair of the Consumer Protection and Housing Committee—to hold a hearing on this,” Bob McCaslin told me. Bob tried to work in an amendment last year on one of the homeless bills, to provide for the construction of manufactured housing parks outside the UGBs. It was defeated. “Now we’re in a situation,” he says, “where we’re closing these parks, and there’s no place for the homeowners to go, there are no new parks being built, and the only affordable land available would be outside the UGBs.

“If they don’t accept my idea of allowing manufactured home parks outside the UGBs, what’s their idea? For low- and middle-income people living in these parks, with the increased assessed valuations, the owners have to increase monthly rates—it’s a hardship on all of these folks.”

In Bob’s district, he’s not seeing as many park closures as are hitting Western Washington. But that hasn’t prevented him from trying to come up with solutions. “Right now, if we want to plan for the future—we have no plans,” he asserts. “People on fixed incomes in these parks are in a terrible dilemma. They need help. We’re creating homelessness if we don’t address this problem. The GMA has been in effect for 17 years. You can imagine the pressures on land within those UGBs.”

**Promising developments in Wenatchee**

The Ninth Street Mobile Home Park sits in an attractive part of Wenatchee, between the railroad and the Columbia River. There’s a foot trail nearby that runs along the river. “It’s a pretty spot,” says resident Teresa Zepeda, who has lived there for four years with her family. The setting is so attractive, in fact, that park owner Kamkon Development plans to replace it with hundreds of condos.

But there’s a big silver lining to this story of displacement: Kamkon has voluntarily offered to create a new park elsewhere, so that the homeowners of Ninth Street will have a place to live.

“We’re creating homelessness if we don’t address this problem. *The GMA has been in effect for 17 years. You can imagine the pressures on land within those UGBs.*”
Preserving our manufactured housing communities

From Kim Herman, Executive Director  
My View

In Wenatchee, “we are primarily a blue-collar, low-wage worker community,” he says. “We’re not at the same level as the west side of the Cascades in terms of housing prices. But we’ve watched our housing prices grow 20% this past year. It’s affecting all levels of housing.” Patrick points to Wenatchee’s 1% vacancy rate for apartments; a year ago, it was 4%. In the Wenatchee Valley, approximately 50% of renters currently lack affordable housing.

“The shortage of affordable housing is increasing; there’s this burgeoning gap. At the same time, manufactured housing communities are under this threat of development. We anticipate that it will only get worse. One or two more are rumored to be closing,” he says.

The good news is that many people are taking notice—and taking action. After Kamkon bought a replacement property for the Ninth Street residents on Okanogan Street, some of the neighbors living near the new site organized to protest the opening of the park. Other neighbors, however, were appalled at this lack of compassion. “Some church folks lived in that neighborhood,” Patrick says. “I got a letter from Les Krober, minister of the Wenatchee Free Methodist Church. He said, ‘As Christians, we have a responsibility to shelter our brothers and sisters. We’d like to support the Ninth Street residents: How can we help?’”

That’s how the Just Housing Coalition got its start last year. The parishioners of many local churches, side by side with Ninth Street homeowners, are taking part. “We started from an ice cream social, and it’s grown from there,” says Patrick. The group has gotten involved in other local issues, including a farmworker housing development that’s being opposed by its neighbors in another part of Wenatchee. “The Coalition is a direct result of the Ninth Street closure and it’s going to have a very positive effect on our community.” The group is now looking at buying land to hold it in trust for affordable future use—“to be the speculators,” says Patrick.

Meanwhile, Kamkon is in the process of securing a second site for the Ninth Street residents. However, the company isn’t making promises for long-term affordability, and Patrick has been working with other organizations in planning for a transition to have a nonprofit ultimately purchase and run the park.

Statewide nonprofit housing developer Common Ground is contributing to the conversation, as is CTED and the Wenatchee Housing Authority (WHA). Also providing advice is Doug Hobkirk, executive director of MHCP. Patrick received word in March that Common Ground would like to use Ninth Street as a demonstration project for how a for-profit park can successfully transition to nonprofit ownership.

A change in attitude

Patrick has learned from experience that if you don’t have the developer on your side, you can’t preserve the housing: “You just don’t have the time to do it,” he states. “The...
time frame for nonprofit development is three or four years out. Common Ground and CTED really understand this. They see the potential for Ninth Street as a model—as a solution for park closures. We’re really excited about this.”

He’s seen a change in attitude toward manufactured housing communities from the state down to the local level. In 2001, a situation similar to Ninth Street occurred with a park that had faced closure in Wenatchee. It was purchased with farmworker housing money from the HTF and operated by WHA—but was ultimately closed down in 2004. At the time, he says, the thinking was that using public money to preserve older-model manufactured homes and save a park was “throwing good money after bad. But people have gained more insight into how mobile home park housing works—the people who live there and how they benefit from it,” Patrick stresses.

“This is the largest source of unsubsidized housing for low-income folks in the state. These are not stagnant communities. They work in multiple layers, providing affordable housing, plus long-term opportunities for younger homeowners. We’re going to need to use some public funds to preserve these parks. There’s no doubt about it. But it truly is good money thrown after good.”