



*Lil' Abner mobile home park in Miami Dade provides housing for approximately 900 extremely low income families, living under the threat of losing their homes.*

# Preservation Strategies for Mobile Home Parks: Lessons from Miami-Dade County

BY CHUCK ELSESSER

**T**he Shimberg Center at the University of Florida calculated that in 2000 there were over 42,000 mobile homes in parks in Miami-Dade and Broward Counties. While the hyperinflation of real estate prices in South Florida during the past five years took its toll on all forms of affordable housing, perhaps no type of housing has been as threatened as these mobile homes.

A recent study by the Planning Department in Miami-Dade County found that since 2000 the number of mobile home residents in Miami-Dade County has decreased by more than 3,000 people. The number of occupied mobile homes had decreased by over 7 percent. Virtually all of these “lost” mobile homes represented unsubsidized affordable housing for some of the County’s most vulnerable residents. The average income for all mobile home owners and renters was just slightly over 50 percent of the area median income. Mobile home renters’ income was significantly lower. Perhaps the most important finding was that the average rent paid by mobile home renters was approximately \$630 a month. This is significantly less than the \$801 rent



charged in a highly subsidized two bedroom Low Income Housing Tax Credit apartment targeted to the same income level.

The Miami-Dade planning study goes on to paint a grim picture for the future of these mobile home parks.

The challenge we are facing is the *elimination* of these housing units that are the only shelter many of the County residents can afford...Existing supply of affordable and workforce units are not adequate to meet the needs of the county residents...Depleting this limited short supply of housing affordable to them would only exacerbate our existing affordable housing crisis.

This is the prediction for all high cost counties. The current reality is that, without intervention counties like Miami-Dade will have no lower income mobile home parks in the not too distant future. This will result in the loss of housing for literally tens of thousands of families that are unable to afford replacement housing and for which replacement housing does not exist.

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However, despite this impending affordable housing catastrophe, there has been very little consideration of programs to preserve this housing. Rather local governments, at best, are considering various proposals to mitigate the harm to the individual families, e.g., providing relocation expenses, first and last months rent or several months of subsidy. Unfortunately, this mitigation is simply pushing off the tragedy of homelessness into the future. Ultimately, these families, who cannot afford even highly subsidized “affordable” rents, will expend their limited relocation subsidies and be evicted.



*The Florida Housing Coalition facilitated a training for the residents of Lil' Abner, bringing together, community organizer, Serena Pérez (pictured above) and FMO cooperative conversion services (Jen Tobin, pictured above) to explain the benefits of resident owned communities and the mechanics of converting an investor owned community into a resident owned community.*

Given the significant cost of replacing even one of these affordable mobile home units with an equally affordable subsidized unit, one would expect that state and local governments would be developing aggressive preservation strategies. But what would a real preservation strategy - a no net loss strategy - look like. Here might be some of the elements:

**1. Local governments must ensure that adequate sites are zoned exclusively for mobile homes, and, at a minimum, that includes those parks that are currently in use as mobile home parks.** Miami-Dade County, for example, has absolutely no land zoned such that a mobile home park can be built without a special use permit. Two thirds of the existing mobile home parks can redevelop without any change in zoning.

**2. Local governments must not approve zoning changes which will result in the closing of mobile home parks.** There is nothing that prevents a local

government from considering the true costs to the community in deciding on a discretionary land use change. In addition to the comprehensive planning requirements, Florida law demands that any local government action which results in the closing of a mobile home park must document that there is adequate relocation resources - not first and last months rent but adequate replacement housing. Such a docu-

mentation is impossible. Indeed, the needy families simply add to the tens of thousands on local government waiting lists for vacant subsidized housing.

**3. Resident or Nonprofit ownership.** Ultimately, the only true preservation model is to transfer ownership into the hands of either the mobile home owners themselves or a nonprofit entity in a limited equity cooperative or community land trust model - preserving the parks and their affordability. - there must be a comprehensive and realistic calculation of the cost of purchase versus the cost of replacement. Ultimately, it is state and local government that bear the cost of homeless or near homeless families. 🏠

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**A workshop focused on the preservation of mobile home parks for the residents who live there will be held at the Florida Housing Coalition’s Annual Statewide Conference on September 16<sup>th</sup>. We will address land use and legal issues specific to Florida as well as nonprofit ownership and options for resident owned communities. Attorney Mitchell Chester, and Paul Bradley, President of ROC USA are two of the featured presenters.**