

Housing Notes

Another Trailer Park Closing

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Like many of the small mobile home parks still remaining tucked away in unexpected places across Athens-Clarke - especially inside the Loop - the AAA mobile home park is one you may have passed a thousand times without ever knowing it was there. Its residents have been told to move out by May 1.

In September of 2006, Patricia Gomez and her husband and two children made a move. After some years of renting and carefully saving, they found an opportunity to buy a mobile home for \$4,000 in the AAA Mobile Home Park on Atlanta Highway near Timothy Road. Just a small one, built in 1979, with two bedrooms and no air conditioning, but it was their own. The park had a fairly long history of stability, they were told, and they thought the move would be a long-term one. A month after they moved in, a run of bad luck began when a storm blew a heavy tree limb through the roof, causing more than \$1000 worth of damage. Not long after that, medical expenses dealt another blow to their finances. Then, in February of this year, the owner of the park sent out letters to the residents informing them that it had been sold and asking them to be out by the first of May, 2007.

For a while it seemed that Patricia and her family might at least be able to save their investment by moving the home to another location. Folks from People of Hope had come around when they heard of the closing and made sure all residents knew how to get their homes inspected for approval to move. But Patricia's home didn't pass because of a problem deemed irreparable by the inspector. At this point, they're just hoping they'll be allowed to abandon the trailer rather than pay another \$1000 dollars or so to get it to the landfill. For Patricia, this episode in her life has been sad but familiar. The same exact thing happened to her family when they were evicted from Garden Springs in 2002 and lost a trailer they had only owned for a year.

Patricia and her family are not alone. Since the closing of Garden Springs, seven more mobile home parks in Athens have closed. The options for affordable housing for

families like hers - a family of four earning \$1800 a month - are narrowing drastically. Many such families see a mobile home, even an old one, as a desirable option because it provides a chance to own their own home and enjoy the privacy not found in high-density apartment living. For families like Patricia's, home ownership is otherwise a mere fantasy. So what are her housing options now? She would like to find another trailer, but says she's scared. "This could just happen again and again," Gomez says. The family would like to be able to buy its own little plot of land that couldn't be sold out from under them, but they can't find anything. They don't want the higher expense and potentially greater instability of renting, but that is what they will probably do.

Oscar Cardenas, director of the nonprofit People of Hope, is concerned about the trend these park closings represent, a trend that further marginalizes low-income families. "It's a housing choice," he notes about mobile home living, "and people should be treated with dignity." When a park closes, he observed, the losses are not limited to homes and lots. "When neighborhoods get disrupted, people lose support systems, the friends who give them a ride to work and watch their kids after school." People of Hope was organized by former residents after the closing of the Garden Springs mobile home park on North Avenue five years ago, and their mission is to open a resident-owned mobile home park. Through grants and fundraising, the group was able to buy land in 2004 to accommodate 40 lots. They then deeded that land to the Athens Land Trust.

They are anticipating closing on a loan in the near future that will start the work on the infrastructure, which will be owned by People of Hope.

Residents will purchase their own homes to move onto the land, and as residents, they will be voting members of the organization.

Though fulfillment of the vision may still be some way away, Cardenas is optimistic. The resident-controlled park is a model that has been very successful in other parts of the country.

This is the first time it's been attempted in the state of Georgia, but, he says, "it's going to take off once people see it can be done." Until then, unfortunately, Patricia Gomez is looking for a cheap apartment.

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