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## Fight to help seniors runs into lobbyists' buzz saw

November 15, 2006

BY **CAROL MARIN** Sun-Times Columnist

State Rep. Ruth Munson (R-Elgin) has stirred up quite a little hornet's nest. As I write this, Munson is down in Springfield fighting to override Gov. Blagojevich's veto of what amounts to a pretty small piece of legislation. But a phalanx of new lobbyists has descended on the Capitol, hired by an industry with deep pockets to defeat her. One of them is Bill Filan, cousin of the governor's budget director.

This is the latest chapter in a David and Goliath story I've been telling you about for a while now.

For two years, Munson and a bipartisan band of mostly female legislators have been trying to help senior citizens who live in what we used to call mobile home parks. We now call them "manufactured home communities." The homes, once they are set on a foundation, are not mobile. And neither are their residents, many of whom are retirees who found this housing more affordable than a brick-and-mortar type of dwelling. About 300,000 people live in these communities in Illinois. If you put them all together, they would be twice the population of Rockford.

For years, most of these manufactured home parks were Mom and Pop operations. Now many of them have been gobbled up by huge corporations. The biggest of them all is the one controlled by Chicago mega-zillionaire Sam Zell. His nickname is "The Grave Dancer" because Zell is a genius at buying up properties and turning them into gold mines. He is, according to Money Magazine, the "nation's biggest landlord." Stockholders are the folks Zell worries about. Residents of these little communities don't appear to command as much of his interest. I don't know that firsthand, of course, because Zell hasn't ever wanted to talk to me.

But I have visited communities he owns. Last year I watched as an elderly couple in Elgin loaded up a moving van and abandoned their two bedroom home. They couldn't afford the rent any longer. Yes, they owned their house. But the didn't own the land underneath it. And when that rent began to skyrocket, they couldn't pay it anymore. They were packing up to live with a daughter out of state.

Little wonder that last March a couple of busloads of residents from all over the state, some in walkers, a few in wheelchairs, staged a demonstration in Springfield, pleading with lawmakers for a little relief.

Munson's bill provided homeowners a few modest rights. A longer lease agreement. A chance to appeal their rents to an independent arbiter. That arbitration, by the way, wasn't even binding. Last spring, after a lot of hard work, Munson and her colleagues in the House and Senate finally managed to get a watered-down version of her legislation passed.

What happened? Blagojevich vetoed it, arguing the bill only applied to publicly traded companies like Zell's, not to private companies. He was correct. Part of the watering-down that had taken place, thanks to industry lobbyists, was to make the legislation as limited as possible by tacking a bunch of amendments onto it. Blagojevich, with a stroke of his amendatory veto pen, could actually have restored the full power of the bill, making it applicable to all manufactured home communities, but he didn't.

Why? Have I mentioned big campaign contributions yet? This industry has handed out a lot of money to a lot of politicians. Zell and his wife, Helen, for instance, wrote checks to Blagojevich in 2002 totalling \$82,000. I don't know if the governor took that into account, but he might have.



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As of 3 p.m. Tuesday, Munson thought she had the votes in both houses to override the governor's veto. But it was going to be a fight. A national group called the Manufactured Housing Institute, a group that includes a number of manufactured home companies including Zell's, sent a letter to legislators arguing that Munson's bill amounts to rent control and would create "irreparable harm" with "irreversible consequences." For the record, Munson's bill does not call for rent control.

Attorney General Lisa Madigan is supporting the Munson bill and the attempt to override the governor's veto, though Madigan would prefer, said spokeswoman Cara Smith, that the original, even broader legislation be enacted.

At 4:05 p.m. Tuesday, my phone rang. It was Munson from the floor. "We just lost by two votes," she told me. "We needed 71 yes votes; we got 69." Two people defected, she said, "within the last hour. Forty voted no, seven voted present."

Munson had one more chance to call it to a vote and immediately went to work. At 4:58 she called back. She and her colleagues had managed to convert a few more votes. They overrode the governor's veto in the house with four votes to spare.

But don't think for a moment this fight is over. Now the measure heads to the Senate. But so do the lobbyists.

I'll keep you posted.

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