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# Elgin's Munson wants to override Blagojevich veto

- Mobile-home park: Measure aims to counter rent surge at Willow Lake

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staff writer

ELGIN — The sponsor of a bill that would give residents of a local mobile-home park for seniors a way to challenge rent increases said she would seek to override Gov. Rod Blagojevich's recent veto of the measure.

Rep. Ruth Munson, R-Elgin, said Tuesday that with the legislation having passed both the House and Senate by greater than a three-fifths margin, she was optimistic that come November her colleagues would vote for passage over the governor's objections.

Residents of Willow Lake Estates in Elgin have complained in the past about skyrocketing rents charged by the park's owner, Chicago-based Equity Lifestyle Properties Inc., formerly known as Manufactured Home Communities Inc. They have said the company has pushed rents to the point that people who want to leave cannot find buyers for their homes and must abandon them.

Munson said she believes the company wants people to leave so it can replace their homes with larger, more expensive ones for which people would be willing to pay higher rents.

Calls to Equity were not returned Tuesday. The company reportedly announced last year that it was freezing Willow Lake rents for two years. However, according to Munson and others, potential new buyers still are being asked to pay significantly higher rents than existing tenants, making it difficult to sell.

Munson's bill would give tenants who object to a rent increase the right to initiate a binding appraisal process in which the tenant and park owner would settle on a licensed appraiser who would determine the fair market rent for the property "based on the existing leases of other tenants in the same mobile home park." Among other things, it also would require park owners to offer leases lasting at least two years.

The bill would apply only to publicly traded companies — a point that Blagojevich focused on in a brief statement issued this week explaining his veto.

"While I recognize and appreciate the hard work of all the sponsors in passing this legislation, the bill would apply to only three of the approximately 900 Illinois mobile-home parks," he said. "Legislation addressing mobile-home park leasing policies should apply uniformly to all Illinois mobile-home parks."

Munson: Relief needed

Munson said the bill would affect 10 mobile-home parks owned by three companies, and that private park owners are less likely to jack up rents and thereby increase vacancies.

"Close to 3,000 people are affected, most of them senior citizens who need some relief," she said. "They need the governor to protect them from corporations that are banking on them having to abandon their homes."

Willow Lake's 617 home sites are built around a pond that stands near the banks of the Fox River on the city's far north side, just south of Interstate 90.

Average annual rent last year was \$8,919, or \$743 a month, up from \$660 a month in 2002, according to company filings. Average annual rent in the 285 parks Equity owns in 28 states was far less, at about \$5,000.

Whether because of the rents or other reasons, the park was less than 78 percent occupied last year, down from 83 percent the year before.

Some note improvements

Nevertheless, not everyone in Willow Lake is up in arms about rents.

Carole Dakan, 68, said that last year the company informed her it was freezing her rent until 2008. And the park has been better maintained since a new manager took over, she and others said.

"I don't hear as many complaints as I used to," said Dakan, a retired hospital employee who was among around 50 Willow Lake residents who went to Chicago to air their grievances to elected officials in late 2003.

Dakan pays \$950 a month for her riverside lot, up from \$725 when she and her husband Ron moved in six years ago. But Ron can fish from their backyard, the views are beautiful, and the couple's home, for which they paid about \$108,000, is twice as big as the one they left behind in Batavia, Dakan said.

"I wish it was a little less expensive, but I certainly am happy here," she said. "It certainly is beautiful."

Sharon Steil, 65, has lived in the park for nine years. Her husband died seven months ago. Steil said she doesn't personally know anyone who has had to move because of rent increases, although she's heard that it's happened.

"I can see where things are going to be a little harder for me," said Steil, who pays \$723 a month for her home, which has a deck and a view of the river. But, she added, "So far I'm OK."

There are a dozen homes under construction or available for occupancy in Willow Lake, according to Equity's Web site. Base prices range from \$75,000 for a 1,100-square-foot three-bedroom to \$129,000 for a 1,680-square-foot two-bedroom. Several new homes occupy prime riverside sites.

Ken Cardwell, 75, said his rent is less than \$700 a month. But it would go up to \$793 for a new tenant. He said he has little hope of selling.

"A mobile home is usually looked upon as a less-expensive way of life," Cardwell said. "But with this rent they have established, it's just too high."

The chairman of Equity's board is well-known Chicago real-estate tycoon Samuel Zell. In 2002, Zell's wife Helen donated \$75,000 to Blagojevich's campaign, and the couple together donated another \$7,500, state records show. The \$82,500 the pair gave Blagojevich put them among his 35 largest contributors in that year, according to the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform.

Equity owns two other parks in Illinois: Golf Vista Estates in far-south-suburban Monee and O'Connells in downstate Amboy. Both are much cheaper than Willow Lake and are either full or almost entirely full.

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