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**PHIL KADNER**

Governor vetoes help seniors in home parks

Friday, May 12, 2006



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You buy a new home in a nice community.

Because you are retired, the place seems perfect.

A maintenance crew takes care of the landscaping and snow removal.

The price is affordable, in large part because you don't own the land your home sits on.

A corporation owns the property.

All you have to do is pay a monthly rent, which may start as low as \$550 a month.

But in a couple of years, the corporation hits you with a new bill.

Suddenly, you may have to come up with \$650 a month. The next year the rent may climb higher still. Soon you can't afford to live in your new home.

In Elgin, some mobile home owners were being charged rents of \$1,500 a month.

This is what thousands of senior citizens are facing as a result of the most recent trend in retirement living.

New mobile home parks, that don't look like the trailer courts of old, are springing up all over the country.

The buildings look like single family homes. They usually sit on a slab of concrete. And they aren't designed to be moved.

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"I've heard story after story where senior citizens have been forced to move because of rent increases," said Terry Nelson, president of the Mobile Home Owners Association of Illinois.

"They try to sell their homes, but no one wants to buy them because of the rent increases. But they still have to pay the rent. I've heard of people who just give up their homes to the companies that run the parks to get out from under.

The landlords then rent the homes to new tenants, although the home owners are forbidden from doing that.

This spring, the state Legislature passed a measure that would have required two year leases and put in place other regulations to protect mobile home owners.

But after heavy lobbying by the mobile home industry, Gov. Rod Blagojevich decided to veto the measure.

The governor's administration claims the bill was so loaded down with amendments that it would have impacted only three mobile home parks in Illinois that are owned by corporations that have publicly traded stock.

"That's not true," Nelson said. "There are at least 10 parks owned by publicly traded companies and at least 3,000 families live in those places."

One of those publicly traded parks is Golf Vista in Monee.

Jane, who lives in the park with her husband, said she sees neighbors struggling to make ends meet.

"These people come here hoping to retire in peace," said Jane, who didn't want her last name used for fear of retaliation. "But if your rent keeps going up every year, you can't have any peace.

"You see people forced to walk away from everything they own. It's sad. And it's not right."

Under current Illinois law, trailer park owners can raise the rent as much as they want, without explanation.

The legislation Blagojevich vetoed would have allowed tenants to hire a real estate appraiser to determine a fair market rent increase if they though landlords were price gouging..

The Manufactured Home Owners Association has also tried to pass legislation creating a dispute resolution panel consisting of two of its members, two members from an organization representing park owners and a member of the Illinois attorney

general's office.

The bill has failed to pass the Legislature.

But the measure requiring two-year leases and giving new tenants five days to back out of a contract did pass.

Why did it only impact publicly-traded corporations that own trailer parks?

"Because we were told that was the only way it could pass out of the Legislature," Nelson said. "We would have preferred that the law cover all the parks in Illinois. But you take what you can get."

Speculation is that lobbyists for privately-owned parks made sure the bill was watered down.

But it did pass the Legislature and made it to the governor's desk.

That's when Blagojevich announced he was going to veto the measure because it was too narrow.

"Our lawyers felt it was unconstitutional as written," said a spokesman for the governor, who said he favored a bill that would have covered all the trailer parks in the state.

Critics contend Blagojevich could have used his amendatory veto power to make the bill applicable to all the trailer parks.

The governor's office contends that would have invited a legal challenge.

Well, as a taxpayer, I would have been happy to see my money spent trying to help senior citizens who are victimized by price-gouging billionaire land owners.

Instead, the guys with the big bucks and influential lobbyists got their way.

Just a coincidence, according to the governor.

Here's hoping seniors remember him in November.

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