

Geust Column: Trailer park residents plot to become landowners

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Just outside Durango, Colorado, there's a trailer park called Westside that I've been driving by all my life. Yet residents there have long lived with the fear that at any time their homes could be taken from them, and now, the worst has happened.

A few days before Christmas, Westside residents received notice that the 5.6 acres of land, with 60 lots, under their homes was for sale for \$5.5 million. The message was in English, and Alejandra Chavez and her neighbors, who mostly speak Spanish and work in service jobs, were devastated.

Alejandra was 13 when she left her native Mexico in 2005 to join her family in Durango. Her parents, Juanita and Alejandro, chose Westside because it was close to town, and they could get to and from work without a vehicle.

They bought their current home in 2010 for \$10,000, and since then have invested another \$15,000 in remodels. Their home is their biggest asset.

“Honestly, my parents would lose everything,” Alejandra told me. “If we wanted to move their trailer, it would break apart.”

Trailer parks like Westside are always vulnerable to speculators. As land prices skyrocket in the West, trailer parks have attracted the interest of large corporations and private equity funds. The trend is so strong that two real estate tycoons launched a website called Mobile Home University to teach investors how to get in “on the ground floor.”

But now, thanks to a new Colorado law, residents like Alejandra Chavez and her parents can fight back because owners of trailer parks must provide residents with 90-day notice of their intent to sell. Before the law, trailer parks could change owners without residents even knowing that the park was up for sale. Now, park inhabitants have a chance to form a cooperative, secure financing and even make an offer of their own. The residents of Westside jumped at the opportunity.

In early January, Westside residents formed the Westside Cooperative, which Chavez co-chairs. Their deadline to secure financing and submit a purchase offer is March 20.

The Westside group has a successful model. In 2021, the residents of Animas View Mobile Home, north of Durango, successfully purchased their community for \$14 million. Seeing a similar situation at Westside, Animas View resident Dan Hunt offered to help out by walking door-to-door, spreading the word about resident-owned trailer parks.

“Our goal was for everyone to be able to afford it,” Hunt told me. “Those with the lowest incomes are at risk of being displaced, which is a terrible scenario. Now that we have control, we have plans to stabilize rents and invest in our park.”

“We want to follow in their footsteps,” Chavez says.

At first, Westside families were wary, as many wondered who would finance the purchase. The price of \$5.5 million sounded like a huge amount of money.

Organizations — and public officials — offered advice, but Elevation Community Land Trust, a nonprofit dedicated to making homeownership more affordable for Colorado residents, stepped up to offer financial support. Elevation CEO Stefka Fanchi said the trust’s goal is to help places like Westside leverage the community trust model so housing remains stable for the foreseeable future.

La Plata County officials helped Westside put together a competitive purchase offer. Then things started moving fast over the last weekend, the owner rejected their first purchase offer, requesting a cash offer, and a quicker timeline. Westside has established a GoFundMe page and now has until March 27 to raise \$500,000.

The big question is whether the owner, Neal Kurzner, will accept their offer. Kurzner is a New York investor who owns apartment buildings and trailer parks across the nation.

“To me it’s going to come down to economics,” Kurzner told me over the phone. “And timing. That’s really how we’ll be making our decision.”

Kurzner has already been negotiating to sell Westside to Harmony Communities, a company based in California that operates 33 trailer parks in the Southwest. Harmony has a history of purchasing parks in Colorado, then immediately hiking rents by as much as 50 percent.

Residents think their offer will be attractive to Kurzner: “We don’t want anyone to gift us anything,” Alejandra’s mother, Juanita, told me during a recent visit to Westside. “We just want an opportunity to get ahead. And why not?”

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