

When Our Homes Were Threatened - How Resident Owners Saved Their Homes and Made their Community Better in the Process

When a dilapidated and neglected mobile home park in South Sacramento was put into receivership by the courts and the State Dept of Housing and Community Development (HCD) ordered closure, the residents were told they would have to move.

Because some of them had been living at the Westerner Mobile Home Park for more than 20 years and had few-or no-other housing options, they knew they had to get help.

“Some of the people had been here when it was just farmland around,” said Jack Ledyard, who lived at the park when it was threatened and is now on the Westerner resident council. “This was the only place they knew.”

The neighborhood surrounding the Westerner had been built up over the years. Blocks and blocks of new, lovely single family homes and a well-maintained city park had turned it into a great suburban neighborhood. By 2007, the Westerner had become an obvious target for any developer interested in purchasing and converting it to a location for new housing construction.

Alarmed at the state mandate to close the park, the residents knew they had to act fast. They enlisted the help of Legal Services of Northern California. Their legal services attorney set up a meeting for the residents with Sacramento City Councilmember, Bonnie Pannell.

Understanding that the homes of these longtime residents were threatened, Pannell immediately connected them to Mutual Housing California, a Sacramento nonprofit that builds, renovates and operates housing in the community interest across the region.

Mutual Housing is known for its resident centered program. Prior to improving the housing communities it purchases and throughout operations, its staff seeks the input and opinions of residents. In fact, a majority of seats on the nonprofit’s board of directors are reserved for resident and former residents.

In addition to its property management staff, a community organizer is assigned to every housing community to help residents form a resident

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Founded in 1988, Mutual Housing California develops sustainable housing that is affordable to a diversity of households. Our housing builds strong and stable communities through resident participation and leadership development. For more information, call (916) 453-8400 or visit our website at mutualhousing.com.

council, provide leadership mentoring and help community members organize events and bring in programs to benefit residents.

Acting quickly, Mutual Housing made a proposal to purchase and renovate the Westerner that was accepted by the court-appointed receiver and the judge. HCD, familiar with Mutual Housing's experience turning housing communities around,



approved the sale and allowed the park to remain in operation under Mutual Housing's ownership. They also provided a loan to assist in the acquisition and renovation of the Westerner through the State's MPROP funds.

Mutual Housing was able to attract other funds to assist with the renovation. Residents helped advocate for funding, testifying at public hearings in support of the Mutual Housing acquisition. In addition to the State Dept of HCD, Mutual Housing secured grants from NeighborWorks America and the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency.

Beginning in 2007, Mutual Housing worked with residents, architects, engineers and construction teams, permitting and funding agencies to address immediate needs as well as more discovered during construction.

A member of NeighborWorks America, the nonprofit has more than 3,000 residents, nearly half of whom are children. For a list of upcoming Building Up Tours and to register visit www.mutualhousing.com.

"We were grateful for everyone's patience—especially the residents—and for their suggestions and input which made for a much better outcome...a much improved community," said Vanessa Guerra, Mutual Housing project manager who oversaw the renovations.

In addition to a new wheelchair accessible community building and property management office, Mutual Housing installed a new storm-drain system, replaced the water-distribution system, improved the protection system for the natural gas piping, improved the fire protection, upgraded the electrical system in parts of the park, repaved the park roadway and most resident driveways as well as upgrading the lighting in parts of the park, creating landscaped community areas, and constructing more parking, as well as other improvements.

The cost of the acquisition and rehabilitation was \$3.5 million. Yet, rents were barely raised and no one was evicted.

"If they hadn't bought it, this place would have gone down the tubes," said Ledyard.

The Westerner was Mutual Housing's first mobile home community purchase. Prior to that, Mutual Housing had only purchased and constructed apartments and townhome communities. Currently the nonprofit provides housing to over 3,000 residents in the region.

"Although we didn't have other mobile home parks then, our board of directors and staff knew it was important to help the residents keep their homes," said Rachel Iskow. "Many mobile home parks in the

Bay Area and along the coast had been converted to other uses over the years due to escalating land values. We knew of residents displaced from their homes...seniors, the disabled, and young families. We were convinced that preservation of the Westerner fit solidly in our mission.

"Today, we are proud to have the owners at the Westerner in our Mutual Housing family and will gladly talk to owners in other mobile home parks about a possible conversion of their communities to Mutual Housing.

"Mutual Housing does not have any interest in selling or converting communities to other uses once we own them. We are a long-term owner. We seek to preserve and operate housing communities in the most affordable manner possible while still creating a high-quality living environment."

Like Mutual Housing's 18 other communities, The Westerner has a resident council that has worked with Mutual Housing to advise on improvements, help develop rules, plant fruit trees, plan holiday parties and other events, and advocate on public policies which affect the community.

"It's a unique place," said Myra Ledyard, Jack's wife. "People come out to help each other when the need is there."

Located near Highway 99 and Cosumnes River Boulevard, The Westerner has a community center with computers for resident use, a laundry room and swimming pool for the families with homes on the 47 spaces.

"This has been a great success," said Jack Ledyard, who also is on the Mutual Housing board of directors. "They have made this place gorgeous," Myra Ledyard added.