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Long-Suffering Sunset Village Residents Face Foreclosure

Tenants seek to buy and manage park themselves

By [Carrie Miller](#) [Email the author](#) July 19, 2011  [Print](#)

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Long-Suffering Sunset Village Residents Face Foreclosure

At a recent Sunset Village residents meeting, Shriver Center attorney Kate Walz (second from left at head table) outlines possible scenarios for buying and managing the park as a Resident Owned Community. Credit [Carrie Miller](#)

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They've lived through frequent stoppages of their [radium contaminated water](#), [sewage backups](#) and third-world road conditions. Now Sunset Village residents are facing a fresh challenge: looming foreclosure and possible eviction.

A judge threw out Chicago mobile home magnate Richard Klarchek's bid to reorganize his debts under Chapter 11 bankruptcy last month and his primary creditor, Jefferson Pilot, has begun foreclosure proceedings.

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[The park's approximately 260 households](#) have been told to redirect their lot rent payments to a court-appointed receiver who will manage the park as the foreclosure proceeds.

"My conversation with him indicates he is friendly towards the residents," Resident Association President Mike Vilches said of the receiver, Steven S. Spinell of the Kinzie Group. "He is starting to do some cleanup of debris and garbage and there has been lots of mowing."

"It's my understanding that the job of the receiver is to make the park presentable for possible buyers as much as possible," Vilches said.

Stuck waiting

Fresh cut grass or no, the impending foreclosure brings yet another phase of emotionally exhausting limbo for the residents, who had already been waiting two years for Klarchek to make court-ordered improvements to their water system and roads before he filed for bankruptcy last October.

Separately, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency filed a lawsuit last year to force Klarchek to clean up radium-contaminated drinking water. Some residents are so leery of their taps they pour bottled water [into their pets' dishes](#).

In an emailed response to written questions, Klarchek defended his stewardship of the park, saying \$7.7 million has been invested there since 2001. Residents say that number is either vastly inflated or must include the price of purchasing new modular home stock he then turned around and sold to residents.

Klarchek also wrote that he tried to fix the radium problems by building a water tower to mix water from three wells to bring down the pollution levels emanating from the deepest one.

"(O)ur commitment has always been to offer affordable housing to our residents while providing the environment of a modern residential subdivision with which to reside within an affluent market such as Glenview," Klarchek wrote.

Taking matters into their own hands

Built in 1947 and annexed into Glenview in 1990, Sunset Village sits on 30 acres wedged between the upscale subdivisions of Heatherfield and Valley Lo.

Its size and prime location have residents worried the bank that owns the land will sell it to a developer for another use, which, under state law, would give them a year or the term of their current lease to clear out.

"That would make a lot of people homeless," said resident Anita Noel, estimating it would cost upwards of \$8,000 to move her newish two-story "Cape Cod" modular home – a price tag out of reach for many of the park's low-income and elderly fixed-income residents.

But rather than wait and watch who buys the land and what they do with it, the park's residents have banded together in an attempt to buy and manage it themselves.

There has been a [national trend](#) towards Resident Owned Communities, which offer the promise of stable lot rents and self-interested investment in infrastructure.

Working with attorneys from the Chicago-based [Sgt. Shriver National Center on Poverty Law](#), the residents' association is looking for a co-owner or bridge financing among several non-profit organizations whose goal is promoting "work-force housing."

The aim of these groups is to make it possible for low and moderate income residents to live near their jobs, which can be particularly challenging in more affluent areas like Glenview.

At a recent residents' association meeting, Kate Walz, Shriver Center director of housing justice, said she's encouraged at the response they have gotten from possible partners but now that foreclosure is on the horizon, any bid to buy the park will have to come together quickly.

"Our opportunity is now, before there is a judgement in the foreclosure case," Walz said.

Should the park be sold to a developer not interested in running a mobile home park, many of Sunset Village's low and moderate income residents would be faced with abandoning their property and leaving a place that, despite a litany of woes, has become a real community for them.

'This is our home'

On a recent early evening, Eugene Jones stood on his neighbor Richard Love's front porch, talking about the park's falling-down infrastructure and escalating rents – and how much they have enjoyed being neighbors since they both moved in 6 years ago.

"This is our home," Jones said, gesturing at the view from Love's porch, an expanse encompassing both neat new modular homes and old abandoned trailers; fresh-planted petunias and weed-choked cracks.

If the residents can't buy the park, both said they hope the new owner will keep it a mobile home community.

Whoever buys the park will have to make the court-ordered improvements, said Glenview attorney Eric Patt.

"We have been in communication with (Jefferson Pilot) to let them know what history is and what our expectations are," he said.

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