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FEATURED

## 'From homeowner to homeless': Sunset Lake Mobile Home Park residents ousted after city buys land

Randal Seyler  
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Several residents of a Benton mobile home park are facing homelessness after the city purchased the land on which their trailers sit.

Residents of the Sunset Lake Mobile Home Park received a notice on March 7 notifying them the “landlord is terminating this lease and your tenancy in 30 days.”

Sunset Lake Park resident Daniel Howard is one of about 100 residents who were told they had to leave the mobile home park.

Howard had lived in the mobile home park for 11 years.

"I went from being a homeowner, to being homeless, that quick," he said.

Howard said his only income he receives is from disability and social security. In 2010, he was riding his motorcycle when he was wounded by a gunshot and had to be airlifted to the hospital.

This ended his 20-year career as a commercial truck driver. Howard said he chose Sunset Lake Community because of its location on the lake, proximity to walking trails and affordability. It had been his home for over a decade, but now he has been told it's time to move. Howard was the owner of his mobile home in the park, but since he was unable to move the mobile home, he had to sell it. Howard said he had to take a financial loss on his home because he had only 30 days to sell it.

For the time being, Howard is living with his daughter.

According to multiple residents of the park, no assistance has been offered from the city to help them move.

Howard said there are about 70 families that currently live in the park and many with children.

Several residents contacted The Saline Courier about the situation, but were hesitant to have their comments published.

While interviewing Howard at the site where his trailer formerly was parked, a manager demanded that reporters leave the property and called the police. The manager refused to give his name to the reporters.

Residents said they were not being refunded the money they had paid toward the purchases.

Resident Michael Brown said he had paid \$200 a month toward the purchase of his mobile home for two years, which would be \$4,800, but he was offered \$800 as a refund.

The March 7 notice, sent by MHP, Inc., dba Sunset Lake Mobile Home Community, stated that "Sunset Lake will work with you to find a new location, but will not in any way guarantee purchase of your mobile home."

Attorney General Tim Griffin's office is looking into the situation, but did not have any information to share as of Friday, according to an email from Jeff LeMaster, communications director for the Attorney General's office.

"If any consumers feel like they have been misled or mistreated, they should file a complaint with our office by calling 501-682-2007 or by going to [www.arkansasag.gov](http://www.arkansasag.gov)," LeMaster said.

LeMaster said the Attorney General's office encourages people to reach out, and noted there is a form on the website Arkansans can fill out to report issues.

Attempts to contact property owner Jim Tucker were unsuccessful, and phone calls were not returned prior to press time.

The City of Benton purchased the Sunset Lake Mobile Park land in January and issued a statement denying rumors that the city planned to build a water park on the property.

"The City of Benton has no plan or agreement to build a water park around Sunset Lake," said Mayor Tom Farmer in the statement.

"Furthermore, the city was approached by the landowner of Sunset Lake Mobile Home RV park about the purchase of his property. We agreed on a price with the owner and told the owner that the city is not in the rental or eviction business, and the city would purchase lots as the lots became available. The Landowner said that he would give his tenants plenty of time to find a new location and that he would help them relocate."

When asked about the situation while the mayor was visiting The Saline Courier office recently, Farmer said there was nothing to discuss about the land purchase and that the matter was settled.

Several of the residents were living in trailers they were purchasing on a rent-to-own agreement, but the residents were informed that the termination of their lease also terminated their rent-to-own agreements, leaving them without a home.

According to the residents, popular forms of agreement between the landlord and tenants is a "rent-to-own" contract and a "lot rental only" contract. According to Kendall Lewellen, an attorney with the Center for Arkansas Legal Services, this creates a vulnerable situation for the tenants.

"In general, formal title to a home should be transferred once the buyer makes all of their payments through a rent-to-own contract. A rent-to-own buyer can take legal action to get the title once they have made all their payments if the owner will not complete the necessary paperwork to transfer title," Lewellen said. "This would allow them to sell the home. In theory, a person who is still paying off a rent-to-own mobile home could move the home to another location.

"Unfortunately, a person who is purely renting a mobile home and the lot underneath is in a very vulnerable situation. If a renter does not have a long-term lease, Arkansas law generally allows the landlord to evict the tenant with 30 days' notice for any reason other than discrimination based on a protected class."

Howard said the community was still letting people move into the park and sign new contracts as recent as September 2022.

Destin Davis

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