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## Trailer-Park Sales Leave Residents With Single-Wides and Few Options

By [COREY KILGANNON](#)

SYOSSET, N.Y., April 11 — In the middle of [Long Island](#)'s Gold Coast, where home prices easily reach \$1 million, sits the Syosset Mobile Home Park, where a trailer can be had for under \$50,000 and the monthly fee for taxes, water and sewage runs about \$500. The children growing up in the park's 80 narrow homes attend Syosset schools, reputed to be among the best in the country.

But fliers stuffed in the mailboxes next to the decorated trailer hitches and propane tanks on April 9 brought bad news: The park had been sold. It was left to the affable handyman to expand on the single-sentence announcement, explaining that the new owners had told him they planned to replace the 250 working-class residents' single-wide slice of the American dream with luxury housing.

"I was totally dumbfounded," said Debbie St. Clair, a Web site developer in her mid-50s who moved to an aging blue-and-white trailer here three years ago after finding she could not afford even a small house in Nassau County. "When I bought, no one ever told me the land could be sold out from under us. I planned on spending the rest of my life here."

Syosset, the last remaining trailer park in Nassau and one of a dwindling number in the New York suburbs, is among several in the region being snapped up by developers in an ever-tightening real estate market. Hidden behind shabby fences, they have persisted for decades as quiet pockets of affordability in expensive enclaves, but as sprawl has grown denser and property values have increased, these parks are steadily being squeezed out.

Local officials and homeowners have long regarded the parks as blight, and now their owners are finding it harder to turn down lucrative offers from developers wanting to build high-end town houses or shopping malls.

It is happening at the Manhattan Mobile Home Park in North Bergen, N.J., a 10-minute drive from the Lincoln Tunnel, and also at Knolls Trailer Court in Mahopac, N.Y. Two parks in Lodi, N.J., are fighting a plan by local government to replace them with a shopping center and housing for the elderly. Other parks are besieged with fears of closing, including the Frontier Mobile Home Park in Amityville, N.Y., where a used single-wide goes for as little as \$10,000 and the trip to Midtown Manhattan by train or car is about an hour.

For residents, who typically own their trailers but rent the plots they sit on, often on one-year leases, such a sale can quickly turn a \$50,000 asset into a liability. In [New York State](#), owners are required to give residents written notice of a pending sale, but no compensation, and can begin eviction proceedings six months after leases expire. Many of the decades-old trailers could not survive being moved even on a flatbed truck, and available plots in the dwindling number of local parks are almost nonexistent.

So Assemblyman Marc S. Alessi, a Democrat who watched the 30-unit Roll-In Mobile Home Park in his Suffolk County close in 2005 and be turned into a Walgreens, has proposed legislation that would require park owners to consider a fair market value bid from the trailer owners before selling to outsiders, similar to laws already on the books in [New Jersey](#) and Connecticut.

“These mobile home owners have nowhere to go,” Mr. Alessi said. “People have invested in these trailer homes, but they’re no longer trailers. They’re stuck on their plots, so the owner has no bargaining power.”

Assemblyman Fred W. Thiele Jr., [a Republican](#) who is also pushing a bill to allow trailer owners to make court challenges to large rent increases in the parks, agreed. “These people invested in their homes with the understanding they could stay on the land,” said Mr. Thiele, whose Suffolk district includes mobile home parks in the Hamptons and Montauk. “But they wind up being at the mercy of whatever the landowner decides to do.”

The lawmakers say suburban trailer parks have become a crucial affordable housing alternative amid rising home prices, and census figures show that their populations are increasingly younger, better educated and more solidly middle class than previous generations of trailer park residents.

In Suffolk County’s approximately 40 parks, the median household income increased to \$43,825 in 2005 from \$33,015 in 1990, a much bigger jump than the overall increase in the county, to \$78,900 from \$76,547. The median age of the park residents fell to 48 from 61, while the median age in Suffolk overall rose to 37 from 33.

At the same time, the percentage of trailer-park residents with a college degree more than doubled, to 18.2 percent in 2005 from 7.7 percent in 1990, and the percentage lacking a high-school diploma dropped to 14.5 from 33.7. (In both cases, the changes outpace those in the county overall: college degree holders jumped to 31.7 percent from 23.2, and those without diplomas dipped to 10.2 percent from 17.7.)

There are some 75,000 trailers in 2,100 parks across New York State, including about 15,000 in 300 parks ranging in size from 5 to 400 units within a 75-mile drive from New York City, according to the New York Housing Association, a trade group for the factory-built home industry. (Just one is within the New York City limits: Goethals Garden Homes Community in Staten Island, a clutch of 130 trailers between a marsh and the Staten Island Expressway near the Goethals Bridge.)

There are roughly 250 trailer parks across Connecticut, according to state officials. No numbers were available in New Jersey, either from the state government or the industry association.

The longtime owner of the Manhattan Mobile Home Park in North Bergen, N.J., died last year, and the property will soon be sold, according to Paul Kaufman, administrator of the late owner's estate. He said several residential developers had expressed interest since a light rail station opened next to the park.

"We feel like sitting ducks," said Maria Castaneda, who has lived in the park about 10 years and takes a quick bus ride to her job as a hair stylist in the Port Authority Bus Terminal on Manhattan's West Side. "This park is a godsend. How else could you live this cheaply so close to Manhattan?"

James Hayes, 73, a retired stagehand who pays \$350 monthly rent to keep his rundown trailer there, said: "I've been offered \$50,000 for it, but now that the park is closing, it's worth nothing."

The morale is no better at Brown's Trailer Park or the Costa Trailer Court in nearby Lodi, N.J., where residents and the owner are fighting the borough's attempt to invoke eminent domain to close them.

"We don't know exactly when, but the end is coming," said Clifton Lawrence, 51, an auto mechanic who bought his trailer 20 years ago for \$7,500 and pays \$650 a month rent at Brown's. "Are they going to just wipe out our homes and push us all out into the street with nothing? Is this a third-world country?"

John Agor, whose family owns Knolls Trailer Court in Mahopac, N.Y., said he had already been offered more than \$1 million for the 3.5-acre plot an hour's drive north of New York City, and that he planned to close the park if it is rezoned for commercial development, a change that he has requested. "Property in that area has so appreciated," he said. "It used to be farmland and now it's surrounded by a shopping center and a gas station."

Mr. Agor said he did not plan to pay anything to residents of the park's 14 trailers, many of whom are World War II veterans who have lived there for decades. "The state law says you just have to give them notice," he noted.

Ray Matthews, 80, a retired propane-gas service technician and a Navy veteran who served in the South Pacific, has been at Knoll's 38 years. He said he had paid \$9,500 for his trailer when he moved in, plus rent that is now \$450 a month, and had invested in hardwood floors, ceiling repairs and new siding.

"I put my life into this trailer, and now it's going to be junked," Mr. Matthews lamented. "I worked hard all my life, but I have no savings and no pension. I live on Social Security checks. Senior housing's all taken up and rents are up around \$1,500. This place was my salvation, and now I've got nowhere to go."

Amid the spate of sales, Richard K. Freedman, president of Garden Homes Management, which owns 74

parks in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, including Goethals in Staten Island, said he was holding fast. "We would never sell a park for another use because they bring in good income the way they are," Mr. Freedman said.

But here in Syosset, in the shadow of luxury developments under construction like Stone Hill at Muttontown, where custom houses start at \$2.3 million, the trailer park offers people with Civil Service and blue-collar jobs a chance to own a home where they grew up. With residents shaken by the news in their mailboxes, Bill Mazzie, the park handyman, said he had pressed one of the new owners, Larry Rush, about plans for the park.

"He said, 'We want to build condos,' " Mr. Mazzie recounted as he showed off a spruced-up single-wide that recently sold for \$75,000. "I said, 'Can I tell the residents this?' and he said, 'No problem.' "

Messages for Mr. Rush were answered by Michael Weinstein, a lawyer who said he represented a group of investors who bought the property but would not say what they planned to do with it.

"My clients are developers, but there are no specific plans at the moment," he said.

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