

Collier County looks to change rules for owners of old mobile home parks

By Maria Perez, May 29th, 2016

Collier County is considering new rules that supporters say will improve conditions in mobile home parks, but others argue they don't go far enough in requiring park owners to replace all substandard trailers.

Immokalee resident Pam Brown said her mother owns a mobile home park that doesn't meet county standards. It was built in the 1950s, she said, but part of the land is now zoned commercial. She said they wanted to make site improvements years ago, but they stopped because county staff wanted to inspect the mobile homes, which don't belong to her mother. Two or three years ago, she said, one of the park tenants wanted to replace the trailer with a bigger one because his family was growing, but he couldn't because the park doesn't meet county standards.

She says the proposed amendment is good for Immokalee, because many park owners want to replace dilapidated mobile homes but they can't afford all the improvements required under the old rules. If they are able to replace the trailers, she said, the appearance of the community will improve.

"I'm glad they are doing something," she said.

Collier County commissioners are expected to discuss and vote on the changes in the Land Development Code this summer.

Steven Kirk, president of Rural Neighborhoods, a nonprofit that offers 240 low-income rental units in Immokalee, said his group supports allowing park owners to replace dilapidated mobile homes if they meet fire safety requirements. But he opposes declaring parks in compliance if owners don't make improvements like establishing setbacks and meeting requirements for dumpsters, private roads and drainage. The county should consider requiring replacing and upgrading a percentage of old mobile homes to grant compliance, he said.

Kirk said the new rules favor substandard parks over others with higher standards. The proposal won't require park owners to invest in upgrades, he said, and will allow them to comply with fewer standards than others and will likely lead to higher rents for their properties that are considered conforming by the county.

"That impedes economic growth. It does not encourage it," he said.

The trailer parks and parcels eligible for the plan were built before the Collier County Land Development Code was approved in 1991. They are located now in a zoning district that doesn't allow mobile home parks or they don't comply with the district development standards, such as setbacks, or paved streets and landscaping requirements.

Those properties are "grandfathered," but their owners cannot add or replace trailers, expand or build in the properties until they bring their properties into compliance by upgrading them.

A previous administrative process, which expired in 2003, required trailer park owners whose property didn't comply and who wanted to receive county compliance to remove substandard trailers and conform with setback, drainage, landscaping and other requirements through improvements. After 2003, owners could still submit a site improvement plan with the same requirements after an order of the Code Enforcement Board or through a settlement with the Board of Collier County Commissioners.

Collier County approved through those processes site improvement plans for 33 trailer parks of 53 identified in Immokalee, according to a 2011 Collier County Growth Management staff analysis. About 20 trailer parks could currently be nonconforming and eligible for the plan that is being proposed now, said Mike Bosi, Collier County planning and zoning director

The new plan proposed by the county requires owners of trailer parks or lots to submit an application and comply with state fire safety regulations such as minimum separation between trailers and having a fire hydrant or similar device. Trailer properties will be allowed to keep the maximum density they have had in the past, even it exceeds the density allowed for the zoning district.

If the property's density is below the maximum allowed in the district, owners will be able to bring in additional trailers by complying in the new lot with some dimensional, drainage and other requirements.

Mobile home park owner Robert Davenport said the old process would have put mobile home park owners out of business and could have displaced people who owned a mobile home. He said some of the trailers many not look good, but they are functional. They don't have leaks, they have windows, they work, he said.

Carrie Williams, an Immokalee mobile home park owner who completed the old process, said she supports allowing mobile home owners to replace units, but has some concerns about the new plan. Williams said the plan shouldn't apply to mobile home units outside of parks or to owners who recently purchased nonconforming mobile home parks. She supports the requirement of removing older trailers, and thinks the community needs time to vet the proposal.

Immokalee Community Redevelopment Association advisory board members were presented the final proposal at a May 18 meeting. Christie Betancourt, interim operations manager at the agency, said the association supports allowing park owners to replace

trailers, but many dilapidated, uninhabitable mobile homes need to be removed. Many, she said, don't belong to the parks' owners but to others who may not have the resources to replace them.

Planning Commission chair Mark Strain suggested those issues could be addressed through code enforcement after a property is declared conforming.

Naples Daily News naplesnews.com

Editorial: Trailer park landlords don't deserve breaks

May 29th, 2016

Collier County commissioners are abusing their public powers by giving cost-saving breaks to owners of rundown Immokalee trailer parks.

Commissioners Georgia Hiller, Tom Henning and Tim Nance need to stop catering to special interests and start working for the public — especially the poor who make up the bulk of trailer park residents. In case after case, the trailers are rundown and dilapidated.

The park owners in Immokalee, like landlords elsewhere, should be allowed to stay in business only if they follow basic construction and safety codes. Nothing more, nothing less.

That approach has been working for Immokalee, slowly yet surely, for 10 years. But that was under former political leaders. This commission appears to spend too much time worrying about the landlords.

Hiller, who has accepted donations from park owners who stand to gain from the softer rules, went so far as to propose seeking state or federal grants to help landlords. It is a wonder that ally Henning sensed the wrongness of that and sided with Commissioners Fred Coyle and Donna Fiala, who can recognize abuses of power taking place.

Commissioner Nance — who represents Immokalee — apparently can't recognize the abuse of power, and that the working poor are the economic engine of this district.

Why should anyone get a price break for circumventing the county's codes, which are aimed at uplifting neighborhoods?

What other property owners are allowed to let units fall into disrepair, while renting them out, and then are granted special favors as rewards?

Robert Davenport, a landlord, donated along with his two businesses \$1,500 to the Hiller campaign. Yet he refused to tell commissioners how much he charges trailer owners to use his property, or talk with a Naples Daily News reporter afterward.

That speaks volumes.

The county should stick with rules such as those applying elsewhere, for landscaping and parking, for example, rather than give in to greenmail — the claims that if landlords are not allowed to get perks then migrants will be stuck in squalor or out on the streets. That merely perpetuates the status quo.

Commissioners gave staff members until September to draft plans for the trailer park policy loopholes to take effect. That only will codify the debacle.

The poor deserve better.