

Residents of Lincoln community flustered by notices to vacate

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By Matt McDonald



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Member Exclusive

Owners of manufactured homes, campers seek agreement with new landlord



Delaware State News/Matt McDonald

Elmer Jefferson sits outside his camper in Pine Haven in Lincoln. The affordable, secluded community has been a good fit for him since he moved in five years ago. But in July, his landlord told him he had to move out by the end of October.

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By Matt McDonald

LINCOLN — In July, Elmer Jefferson's landlord told him he had until the end of August to leave his home, a community called Pine Haven.

The manufactured home community and campground where Mr. Jefferson lives in his camper would soon be sold, the landlord said, and the incoming buyers wanted him — and all of his neighbors in campers — out.

Mr. Jefferson and his Chihuahua, Molly, moved into Pine Haven in 2017. The 74-year-old Lewes native was a shop foreman for ConAgra and was driving trucks before he retired a decade ago; he knows his way around a diesel engine and other machines, and can rebuild the automatic transmission for a forklift.

He much preferred the peaceful solitude of Pine Haven — 20 acres nestled in an out-of-the-way thicket of trees next to Yogi Bear's Jellystone Park — over sharing an apartment with a group.

"I like being by myself," he said. "I'm too damn old, and I'm too set in my damn ways."

As more and more people received the notice to move out over the summer, most of those who had the means to leave did so. Some took their mobile homes with them; others left theirs abandoned where they stood.

But even after the community officially changed hands in September, dozens of residents remain in Pine Haven.

That's because it is one of the rare neighborhoods that is affordable for those who live with disabilities or are retired. Mr. Jefferson, who later learned he could stay through the end of October, has been able to live off Social Security. When he first moved in, he paid \$450 a month for lot rent and utilities. Now, he pays \$500.

Like Mr. Jefferson, many residents are facing deep worries about the future. Asked if he knew where he would go if forced to leave, he said no, even though he has applied for a low-income apartment in Milford.

Then, he changed his mind and motioned to his truck.

"Back of that pickup," he said.

‘They all know what’s going on’

Some Pine Haven residents said they were blindsided by the news that their community was for sale.

For the past couple years, Debby Holoeman, 64, had been living with her son and his family in Georgetown. She had been searching for a place to live by herself, but all options were out of her reach.

“Somebody works all their life, and when you get to this point, you know, that you can’t even afford an apartment to live — that’s pretty sad,” said Ms. Holoeman, who has been employed as a caregiver.

Then, in June, she came across a listing for a camper in Pine Haven a resident was selling on Facebook Marketplace. It seemed, at the time, like a residence she could spend the rest of her life in. She discovered the home “smelled really funky” of tobacco smoke. Still, she knew she could clean it up enough to be comfortable, so she purchased it and began paying lot rent.

But soon after, she received a notice that she had to be out by October.

“I’ve just been sick to my stomach,” Ms. Holoeman said. “I thought this was my forever place. And now, here I am. I don’t have a penny to my name.”

Pine Haven’s former owner, Dale Cohee, 76, said he decided to sell after he was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease last year. Since then, he has been bedridden for spells lasting up to five days.

But he insisted that residents were kept informed throughout the months leading up the sale, even as some, like Mr. Jefferson, said they never received anything in writing.

“They all know what’s going on,” he said.

After settlement Sept. 15, Pine Haven’s new owner was Blue Water Development, a real estate and hospitality management firm out of Ocean City, Maryland, according to Mr. Cohee.

Blue Beach Bungalows, a Delaware company formed this year, owns the property, according to Sussex County records. But Blue Water Development employees have repeatedly been spotted on the grounds since, and residents have been told to hand their rent checks in at Jellystone Park, which last year became one of the 44 properties Blue Water owns or manages.

The name of a limited liability company owned by Blue Water — RIG Acquisitions — appeared on the original July 18 notice given to camper residents about vacating Pine Haven or facing removal by law enforcement.

An employee in the marketing division confirmed receipt of an emailed list of questions Sept. 27 and said a representative would respond. As of Friday, no one had.

Campers and mobile homes

Delaware law spells out specific rules for the treatment of manufactured homeowners paying rent to live on a property. These include, for example, requiring the owner of a manufactured home community, in certain circumstances, to provide residents a year's notice before terminating rental agreements.

The rules exist because of the inherent power imbalance between a homeowner living in a such a neighborhood and their landlord.

"We don't own the land. We own our home," said Bill Kinnick, president of the Delaware Manufactured Homeowners Association.

Because it can easily cost thousands of dollars to move a manufactured home off a rented lot, landlords have a lot of power over homeowners renting their parcels.

"It's important that we have laws to protect people, so they don't lose their homes," Mr. Kinnick said.

To that end, in July, Gov. John Carney signed into law a bill that extends most of those protections against sudden rental terminations to certain people living year-round in campers within manufactured home communities. But the law does not apply to all campers. For example, those that are mobile are not covered.

Anthony Panicola, a lawyer for the Community Legal Aid Society, which is representing some homeowners in Pine Haven, said his organization looks forward "to getting a chance to speak with the new owners and work with them to try to find a resolution that works out in everyone's best interest."

"We believe that our residents are still protected — fully protected — under Chapter 70 as manufactured homeowners," he said, referring to the part of Delaware Code that deals with these communities. That includes residents of Pine Haven who qualify as manufactured homeowners under the new law, he added.

'Just don't make sense'

As it stands, Blue Water is treating Pine Haven's year-round residents differently depending on whether a person lives in a manufactured home (sometimes called a trailer or mobile home) or a camper/RV, despite the new state law that in some cases gives the same protections to both.

Since the residents in campers were told this summer they would need to move by Mr. Cohee, they haven't heard anything on the contrary from Blue Water. As far as they know, Blue Water will try to force them out before November.

"It's like you're a piece of damn trash," Mr. Jefferson said.

Manufactured home owners, on the other hand, had their first interactions with Blue Water when the company sent two men knocking on the doors of their homes on a recent Thursday, a group of residents reported. The men looked like police — they had uniforms, silver badges and holstered weapons — but the badges identified the men as private security, not law enforcement officers, they said.

The men gave each person a stack of documents. On top was a letter signed "Pine Haven Property Manager," which, in part, promised that recipients could stay in their homes for three years.

Underneath was a lot license agreement permitting the licensee to stay in Pine Haven for only April through October for the three years. The agreement mentions RIG Acquisitions, not Blue Water, though it does bear the latter company's Ocean City address.

Sherry Rollman, 49, lives in her home throughout the year — like everyone else who received the license. She found the documents to be baffling and infuriating. The confusion was compounded by the fact that they had received what was essentially the same license agreement in August.

The security guards asked the homeowners to sign a paper confirming they'd received the documents but didn't have any of them sign the license agreement at the time, the residents said.

Ms. Rollman recalled the waves of emotion she felt as she read the paperwork: "Bad. Defeated," she said, breaking into tears.

After a long pause: "Mad. Shocked."

The stress of recent months has taken a heavy toll on Ms. Rollman, exacerbating her long struggle with depression, she said, adding that it "just don't make sense."

The uniformed men told the residents that the new owners would organize a meeting with them at some point. They didn't know when.

Between all the paperwork and the lack of communication, it seems to some Pine Haven occupants as if Blue Water knew little about them.

Jeremy Suloff, 36, was among the first to get the letter from the new owners. He has four children, two of whom, ages 6 and 14, live with him at Pine Haven. He said he doesn't trust Blue Water's promise to let his family stay through 2025.

"This is the kicker for me," he said of the owner's promise. "That cover letter, ... it says 'hand-delivered.' It doesn't say who it's from."

This article has been updated with more information about the owner of the Pine Haven property.

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