



NEWS

Petaluma Mobile Home Residents Organize in Fight Against Park Closure

By [Riley Palmer](#)  Sep 7

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Littlewoods residents attend a press conference at the mobile home park in Petaluma, Sonoma County, on Tuesday, Aug. 29, 2023. Residents are faced with eviction after the management company threatened to shut the park down due to Petaluma's new rent stabilization rules. *(Juliana Yamada/KQED)*

This story contains a correction.

Christopher Brown has called Littlewoods Mobile Villa home for 27 years. His favorite parts about the Great Lakes single-wide mobile home are that it was designed to last, made of durable materials like steel – and that he owns it.

But what Brown and the other residents at Littlewoods don't own is the land underneath their homes. Tenants pay to rent space in the 78-unit park. For Brown, that's about \$600 a month.

'When you have a corporation running a park, their number one interest is profit, and that's going to cause problems for the residents.'

—Margaret DeMatteo, housing policy attorney, Legal Aid of Sonoma County

Affordability has kept many tenants of Littlewoods feeling secure. However, after Brown received a potential closure letter from the park's owners in July, a month after Petaluma's city council began discussing whether to adopt **rent control**, that sense of stability was shaken.

"I went to my room, I sat down, I read [the letter] and I read it again. I was just blown away," said Brown. "I read it a third time. My mind wasn't wrapping around it. In that moment, I just felt broken."

The letter specifically mentioned that property owners are unsure if they can continue running the park with measures taken by local and state governments. Littlewoods Villa is owned by the Ubaldi Family, which also owns Carriage Court in Santa Rosa. The park is managed by Harmony Communities.

Brown is a former delivery truck driver who spent most of his life transporting grapes from Sonoma County wineries, until a bad back injury a few years ago. Now he's on disability and relies on a fixed income. The rent at the park has allowed him to stay at Littlewoods Villa, in the two-bedroom, metallic mobile home he shares with his roommate Donna Dillard and their two little dogs, Sergei and Becky Woo Woo.



Christopher Brown poses for a portrait in front of his mobile home at Littlewoods Mobile Villa in Petaluma, Sonoma County, on Tuesday, Aug. 29, 2023. Brown has lived at Littlewoods for 27 years and along with many others is faced with eviction after the management company threatened to shut the park down due to Petaluma's new rent stabilization rules. *(Juliana Yamada/KQED)*

Tenants of Littlewoods Villa in Petaluma remain in limbo. The fate of the place they call home has been put in jeopardy by the potential closure notice, a move they say is retaliatory after Petaluma **adopted stronger rent control laws surrounding mobile home parks** on July 17.

Brown and other park residents are now worried that if the owners decide to close Littlewoods Villa, they could be left homeless.

In light of potentially losing their housing, residents decided to take action and began organizing under the name Neighbors United.

“We talk about how we’re going to get the word out into the community, how we’re going to continue to organize our get-togethers, our meetings, and what actions we’re going to take,” said Brown.

The last beacon of affordable home ownership

Mobile home parks are often the last affordable housing options for home ownership, especially for tenants who are older, lower-income or live on a fixed income, like social

security or disability.

The high cost of housing, especially in an increasingly expensive Bay Area, has trickled down to mobile home communities. In 2018, the average home price in Petaluma was a little under \$700,000. This year, the **median home price** is \$935,000. Meanwhile, corporate owners have eyed mobile home parks as **lucrative investments**, driving up rents for tenants.



Residents walk through the streets of Littlewoods Mobile Villa in Petaluma on Tuesday, Aug. 29, 2023. *(Juliana Yamada/KQED)*

“When you have a corporation running a park, their number one interest is profit, and that’s going to cause problems for the residents,” said Margaret DeMatteo, a housing policy attorney for Legal Aid of Sonoma County.

She has concerns about the national trend of corporation management companies buying mobile home parks to increase profit. DeMatteo pushed for expanding tenant protections to include mobile park homes by advocating for tenants at city council, and participating in tenant rights workshops to help educate residents on their protections under state and local law.

According to [California's 2023 Mobile Home Residency Law \(PDF\)](#), rent control regulations are left up to each city to decide.

DeMatteo said the new rent control rules are similar to ones adopted in nearby Santa Rosa, Windsor, and Rohnert Park, but Petaluma was the first place she saw owners threaten to close their parks in response. Since then, owners of parks in Petaluma and Cloverdale have taken similar actions.

“They are a way to strong-arm homeowners into paying a rent increase of up to 150%,” Dematteo said. “If you want us to stay open, you have to voluntarily pay more space rent.”

Residents fight for their park

The news of potential closure disrupted what would have been a normal summer of barbecues at Haley Gonzalez's grandparents' mobile home. The 11-year-old attends Miwok Valley Elementary, which conveniently shares a chain link fence with the park. Her entire family lives at Littlewoods and relocation for a mobile home is expensive. It can cost [anywhere from \\$3,000 to \\$14,000](#) depending on the mobile home's size and the destination distance.

She and her mother Claudia Gonzalez have been attending tenant meetings since they got the notice. Usually around 80 people show up, sometimes over 100.

“I just want to fight for my park,” said Haley. “My friends and family live here, and I just want to be with them.”

Martin Contreras has also lived at the park his whole life and after graduating from Sonoma State earlier this year, he began teaching band class for fifth and sixth graders at Miwok Elementary.

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Contreras has also been a key leader in organizing tenants. After an initial meeting with park management, he and a few others realized they were stronger together. They reached out to a local advocacy group, North Bay Organizing Project, and started attending city council meetings. During public testimony, they shared their experiences and met other tenants in similar situations.

“We’re all coming together collectively and sharing our passion, and spreading positivity, but it is a stressful time to be in for everyone,” Contreras said.

Contreras is also bilingual, and has made it a point to advocate for the monolingual Spanish speakers in Littlewoods, who make up around 80% of residents.

At a meeting to negotiate potential rent increases as a way to keep the park operational, Contreras said the management team neglected to bring a translator.

“Myself and one of my peers who have been stepping up to lead this asked if we could interpret, and they were defensive about it. But ultimately they let us,” he said.

The ordinance, which went into effect on Aug.17, prevents property owners from increasing rent by more than 4% annually, or 70% of the Consumer Price Index, whichever is lower.

Councilmember Karen Nau, whose district includes the Littlewoods park, was part of the unanimous vote to amend the rent ordinance. But Nau also recognized the potential harm for property owners who say they’re unable to raise rents to meet inflation.

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“Listening to park owners, I understand. The management company said that Petaluma raised their water rates,” said Nau. “That’s because of the cost of living, and you can use less water, but you can’t raise the rent of the current residents.”

Nau said that allowing property managers to increase rent for new residents could be a happy medium, but in order to do that, the ordinance would need to be amended by the city council.

In a statement to KQED, Littlewoods Villa owner Nick Ubaldi explained why the rent control limits affect his family’s business.

“Considering basic economic principles, if revenue is capped at 70% while costs increase by 100% or more, it becomes unsustainable for a business to continue operating long-term. The changes that have been made to the ordinance do not provide any safety valve for operators. We would rather voluntarily go out of business now rather than be forced into a bankruptcy down the road.”

Neighbors united are stronger together

On Aug. 29, tenants of Littlewoods Villa gathered to speak out against the possible closure. They were joined by residents of neighboring mobile home parks, who showed up with their families in solidarity.

In its most recent letter to residents, the management company said that in order to close the park, the owners would have to submit a relocation impact report to the city, and would be sending a representative to interview tenants at Littlewoods Villa on Sept. 6.



Liliana Muñoz speaks at a press conference at Littlewoods Mobile Villa in Petaluma, on Tuesday, Aug. 29, 2023. Muñoz and her children reside at the mobile home park, and are being threatened with eviction by management due to Petaluma's new rent stabilization rules. *(Juliana Yamada/KQED)*

Among the residents who shared their stories was Liliana Muñoz. She grew emotional, choking back tears, as she imagined where her family would go, if they were forced to leave.

“My duty as a single mother is to give my children a home. Without my home I would not be doing my duty.”

If the closure goes forward, Muñoz would have to sell her car to afford relocation costs. She also wouldn’t know what to do without her neighbor, who provides free child care for her two children while she’s at work.

“Last night, I came home from work at around 9 p.m., and [my neighbor] was waiting for me with a hot bowl of chicken soup,” Muñoz said.

Resident Christopher Brown also shared his concern for Littlewoods with the crowd.

“I can’t sleep at night. I worry about my neighbors, their children, and the elderly.” Brown said. “The Petaluma community does not need more homeless on the street.”

Sept. 12: A previous version of this story indicated that Harmony Communities was the owner of Littlewoods Villa. The story has been updated to reflect that Harmony manages the park’s operations. The story now includes a response from park owner Nick Ubaldi.

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