

Smiles return to Wonderland Estates



Sale keeps mobile-home park open

By EMILY GARLAND
Staff writer

Art and Mae Breeden celebrated one of their best Thanksgivings last weekend. The holiday cheer came partly from visiting family members and partly from the news that their mobile-home park is saved from demolition.

"Our gratitude goes beyond expression," says the 67-year-old Art. "It's really hard to put into words how we feel."

The Breeden's gratitude goes partly to the King County Housing Authority, which purchased Wonderland Estates Mobile Home Park Tuesday for \$8.4 million. The rest of their gratitude — and that of their remaining neighbors — goes to the several organizations and individuals who have helped Wonderland's 55-and-older residents since the park went up for sale in June 2006.

"The county has been absolutely wonderful," Art says.

Matt Brashears/Renton Reporter
Residents of Wonderland Estates pose with signs they made to thank everyone who helped save their mobile-home park. In the 18 months since word came that the park was up for sale and marked for redevelopment, many residents moved out, evidenced by a trio of empty slabs that abuts a new housing development located next door. Pictured residents are, front row, left to right: Myrtle Wheeler, Betty McLemore, Joye Ann St. Laurent, Alice Zhender, second row: Don Charnley, Carmen Sigmun, Lela Holmes, Mae Breeden and Carol Swenson. Back: Arthur Breeden.

"Everybody, and the city — we have a lot to be thankful for."

Wonderland Estates is on Maple Valley Highway, just east of Renton. The 12.2-acre park is part of 373 acres likely to soon become part of Renton.

The past 18 months have been a wild ride for Wonderland residents. First they heard the park's owner, Robert Eichler, wanted \$12 million. Then they learned Eichler had submitted applications to King County to turn the park into 100 homes. They had until August 2008 to move out.

"It's been very stressful on a lot of people," says Mae Breeden, 62.

The Breedens and their neighbors began with pancake breakfasts — hoping to earn enough to purchase the Maple Valley Highway park. Then Manufactured Housing Community Preservationists stepped in. (MHCP is a Washington nonprofit that purchases, renovates and then operates mobile-home parks as low- and moderate-income housing.) Next, Renton Housing Authority offered Eichler 19 acres in Fairwood for Wonderland.

Nothing worked — until the King County Housing Authority signed a purchase and sale agreement with Eichler Sept. 18. The deal closed Tuesday, making Wonderland Estates the fourth authority-owned mobile home park.

"We're pleased to have gotten this far," says Dan Watson, deputy executive director of King County Housing Authority. "And we're very much looking forward to working with the residents to make this a great place to live — and affordable as well."

Watson says it was "no easy task" convincing Eichler to accept \$3.6 million less than his \$12 million asking price, and \$1.6 million less than their agreed-upon \$10 million. But Watson said it was a task made easier by a "precipitous" land-value drop.

The Housing Authority borrowed the \$8.4 million. Watson expects county and state funding to cover \$5 million to \$6 million, in six months to a year.

MHCP will help King County Housing Authority

provide off-site management. The park's current on-site managers, Donna and Randy Cleveland, will remain.

With their help, Watson says Wonderland will remain a mobile home park in "perpetuity."

"I don't think it's anybody's intention to see this operate as anything other than a mobile home park," he says.

Those are the words Wonderland residents have been waiting 18 months to hear.

About 60 residents heard the early version of these words from King County council member Reagan Dunn and King County Housing Authority officials at a Nov. 6 meeting.

"When Reagan Dunn walked through the door, I knew it was a done deal," Art Breeden says. He and Mae have lived at Wonderland since 2000.

Sharing the good news was a privilege for Dunn.

"Actually one of the most special things I've ever been able to do in government is to deliver the news that their homes were saved," he says.

"People were crying," he adds. "Someone shouted, 'We're finally going to have Christmas this year.'"

That's those who remain. Mae has seen six to eight families move out since the park went up for sale.

Manager Donna Cleveland says all but about seven of the park's 109 lots were occupied 18 months ago. Only 62 are now occupied, she says.

Empty concrete slabs speckle the park — surrounded by mobiles whose porches, yards and decorations make them look anything but mobile.

"If only those who had given up and moved had just hung in there a little longer," says Betty McLemore.

McLemore, 71, moved into a double wide at Wonderland in March 2006. She came from a Covington mobile-home park that shut down and turned into houses.

"It's great I don't have to move again," says the part-time public storage worker. "I'm extremely relieved."

McLemore planned to abandon her mobile and move into a motor home in her daughter's Renton backyard if Wonderland closed.

"If the park closed, there's just no way I could try to move this," she says. "I just

don't have money anymore — and no place to put it.”

Lack of space at other mobile-home parks and lack of state funds to relocate residents makes moving a mobile difficult.

Still, many former Wonderland residents are eager to return.

Vera Schmoe moves back into her mobile today (Saturday). The 96-year-old

lived at Wonderland nearly 16 years — six houses apart from her daughter, Carol Krzycki, 73.

Krzycki will stay in the two-bedroom mobile she and her mother moved into in September in a Kent mobile-home park. The pair didn't expect Wonderland to be saved.

“We thought for sure that it was just going to go down,” Krzycki says. “When we heard

it was saved was when several of (Schmoe's) friends and cousins called, saying, ‘You're never going to believe what happened.’”

Schmoe loved Wonderland, Krzycki says. Krzycki liked Wonderland, too, and expects to return to Schmoe's mobile when her mother dies.

Wonderland's residents are

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all over 55 — many into their 60s and 70s. Most want to stay in the park until they die.

“Hopefully they’ll drag us out of here in a bag,” Mae Breeden says.

Wonderland residents have worked hard for that outcome. In addition to fundraising, the senior citizens made many trips to state Legislature, city and county

council meetings, pleading for assistance for all mobile-home residents.

They don’t regret any minute of the fight.

“It virtually stopped everybody’s life,” says nearly two-year resident Don Charnley, 66. “But the end result was all worth it. The long, hard battle was all worth it.”

“If we had to do it all over again we would devote even more time and effort to it to make sure it happened

sooner,” Charnley adds.

Charnley says Wonderland’s residents would eagerly help other parks in similar predicaments.

“I believe what we accomplished here is going to have a trickle-down effect in some way or another,” he says.

Dunn agrees.

“It’s an indicator of things to come,” he says. “We’re going to have more of these situations coming up, and we’ve got to have a better

way to deal with low-income housing.”

Mae Breeden is just glad their fight is over.

“It’s definitely been a wild ride,” she says. “And I’m so thankful it’s over. It’s the best Thanksgiving thing we could have — to know we’re going to be safe now.”

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