

Senator Curry, Representative Gere and members of the housing committee:

I am in support of LD 1723, An Act to Amend the Laws Governing Manufactured Housing Communities to Prevent Excessive Rent and Fee Increases.

In 2015 I was living in a rented apartment a few towns from here. My son had just finished a terrible year at a charter school, which followed years of struggle with getting the local public school to adhere to his special education plan. Sending him back to either school would have been disastrous for his education. Renting an apartment in a new town would have been the obvious choice but my fixed income made that impossible. I was scared for my son's future and so very, very stuck. And then my miracle happened. A friend told me about a mobile home for sale in Bay Bridge Estates. I arranged to meet the owner and one loan and a bunch of paperwork later, I was a homeowner. Owning a home had been so far beyond my reach that I didn't dare dream of it but there I was, in a 25 year old mobile home that was MINE. The neighborhood was safe, my son could attend a good school, and most importantly, I could afford my rented lot even with my low income. It really did feel like a miracle.

Over my years living in Bay Bridge I have met so many neighbors with stories like mine. We all moved there for different reasons but the common thread was affordability and security. Unlike traditional rentals, we could live without the constant fear of being priced out of our home with no place to go. For many, it was where they fled when they did get priced out of their old neighborhoods. I may be unique in feeling like it was a "miracle", but I have heard over and over how grateful people were to have been able to make a home in Bay Bridge Estates. Not because life there was wonderful, but because it was possible.

And then came 2021 when our park was sold to a huge corporate entity that owns more than 80 mobile home parks across 19 states. Within 3 months we were hit with the biggest rent hike the park had ever experienced. Unfortunately, it paled in comparison with the increases they imposed on us each of the following three years. Since they took over, the lot rent for existing tenants has gone up by more than 46%. Rent for people moving into the park jumped by 95%. The gratitude I used to hear of has been replaced by fear and resentment. Fear that the next rent hike will lead to losing their home (as it already has for some) and resentment of the corporation that is quite blatant in putting their profits above the lives of the humans who live on their land.

In addition to our lot rent and mortgages, mobile home park residents are responsible for utilities, home repairs, and yard maintenance like any other homeowner. Our corporate landlord is only responsible for maintaining the roads, water & sewer infrastructure, and general safety of the property. As some of you may already be aware, when Bay Bridge Estates was purchased by Legacy Communities in 2021, there were many neglected maintenance issues that needed significant attention. The aging water infrastructure was springing leaks on a regular basis, the septic tanks that 1/3 of the park relies on did not have a regular maintenance schedule, and we had a serious tree problem that resulted in huge

limbs (and sometimes whole trees) crashing down on homes on a far too frequent basis, much more than just during extraordinary weather events. Within two months of purchasing the park, Legacy published a glossy flyer revealing their plans to improve the property by adding amenities such as a clubhouse, playground, and dog park. Being a company whose sole business is managing their more than 80 mobile home parks around the country, we thought they would certainly take care of the infrastructure problems before adding “frills”. Unfortunately, not only did they not resolve those issues, they made some of them even worse by putting more than 50 brand new homes on previously empty lots, adding further stress to the already fragile water infrastructure. They cut down trees on those empty lots but did almost nothing to take care of the hazardous trees threatening the existing homes. They placed 40 of those brand new homes on lots with long-dormant individual septic systems without having them inspected to determine if they would be functional. The industry expert I consulted told me that any system that has been unused for more than 5 years should be inspected and perc tested before installing a new home, yet Legacy apparently saw no problem with planting thirty of those new homes on lots that had been vacant for more than a decade. As expected, many of those new residents have had very messy problems. And to add insult to injury, Legacy never followed through with any of the promised amenities that they advertised (and still advertise) to lure buyers to all those new homes.

We have watched this company skirt their responsibilities by using loopholes and power to avoid taking care of the issues. One of the loopholes they exploit is that the Maine Manufactured Housing Board can't compel parks to take care of the trees unless a licensed arborist tells them in writing that individual trees are hazardous. How does the park owner get around that? They just don't have the trees inspected. Or, rather, they don't have arborists give them written reports or share the results of any inspections with the residents who continue to live with the constant fear that giant limbs will crash through the roof and make their home unlivable. An added “benefit” to the park not getting arborist reports in writing is that they are shielded from liability when a home is damaged or destroyed. Without that report, any such damage is considered an “act of God”, not the result of willful neglect. As you may already suspect, my own home is one of those at high risk from the towering trees, several of which stand within feet of my outside walls. When a windstorm is forecasted, I grab my always-packed “go bag” and find somewhere else to sleep until it's over.

As residents of mobile home parks, we are stuck. We are both individual home owners and we rent the space our homes are on (homes that we can't realistically move). Because the park is private property, there are many protections and supports that are not accessible to us. For instance, in a rental apartment, if a safety issue is not being addressed by a landlord, a tenant can call their town's code enforcement office and have support in rectifying the issue. Code enforcement can require our residents to get permits to build a shed but can't inspect the trees that could destroy the shed after it's built.

In many ways, it feels as though we are held hostage by predatory corporate park owners who push lot rent higher and higher to line their pockets without regard for their responsibilities to us as humans and renters. In the 3.5 years since Legacy Communities purchased my park for \$8 million they have collected \$9.8 million in lot rent. So why haven't they done more to fix the major infrastructure problems that threaten our health and safety? Because they don't have to. Most of our problems are not covered by the Manufactured Housing Board's "community licensing standards". They can check to make sure people don't have junk in their yards but they can't inspect the pipes that supply close to 500 households with water or require the park to hire an arborist to evaluate the 75-100 foot trees that damage multiple homes every year.

I got involved in advocacy within our park during a water in 2018 when our park was without water for several days. Since the purchase of the park in 2021 the stories have continued to become more heartbreaking as people are forced to comply with rent increases and failing property with no choice and limited ability to advocate for themselves. The issues at hand are incredibly complex and overwhelming, and a lot of our neighbors don't have the ability to effectively advocate and take action. I am here as both a Bay Bridge homeowner and a representative of the Broken Bridge Tenant Union. We are asking this committee to please support LD 1723 and, at last, put even minor guardrails against giant corporations that, without hyperbole, threaten our very existence.

Sincerely,
L Marieke Giasson
Bay Bridge Estates