

# As housing costs rise, mobile home residents are getting squeezed out

By Luke Schmit | University of Montana School of Journalism

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*Luke Schmit, University Of Montana*  
Sign in front of the KOA Holiday in Missoula.

Last winter, residents of a mobile home park in Missoula found out that the development had been sold and that rents would go up. The park's new owners also plan to change the property's layout, which will displace some long-term renters.

Ralph Escalante and his girlfriend live in the park, in a dark yellow trailer built in 1972. The park is next to the Missoula Kampground of America (KOA), and Escalante's home is in one of the lots the park's new owners will eliminate. The new owners plan to build a wall or fence to further separate the KOA from the mobile home park.

"They sent us a letter in the mail that said sometime in the future, they'd let us know when we have to move out," Escalante says. "They're building this wall to make a distinction between the two parks. They haven't shown us any maps or, you know, plans for it, but why do they need all this space? I mean, it's pretty, pretty big."

Before the sale, the Missoula KOA had the distinction of being one of the oldest family-owned KOAs in the country. Laurie Wisby's family sold it last December to Missoula Valley Partners, an LLC registered in Bend, Oregon. Neither Wisby nor Missoula Valley Partners responded for comment.

For Escalante, the sale is tough news.

"I was kind of sad and upset in a way because we just bought this mobile home a couple of months before we got the letter."

Originally, Escalante didn't know what his next step would be. He didn't have a backup plan, but recently he learned that a travel trailer would open up in the park a few streets over.

Escalante is still concerned, though. "What's the investor's plans? In five years, are they going to change it into another apartment complex?"

For Escalante's neighbor Kelcie Mostad, finding another spot in the park isn't an option. Mostad lives in a green trailer home from 1995 on the street where the wall will be built.

"Get home from having a baby and everything, you finally get settled in, and then you know, like the week before Christmas, find out that you got to move," Mostad says.

Mostad has dealt with the housing crisis for a few years since graduating from the University of Montana with a bachelor's in management and entrepreneurship. She currently works at Envoy Mortgage in Missoula.

"I work in the housing industry, and I've seen in the last three years how it's exploded," Mostad said. "And it's just, it's kind of disheartening to see your hometown get turned into this kind of bougie ... It sucks. I'm an emotional person. It's hard seeing your hometown turn on you."

There has been a 14% increase in mobile home living in Missoula over the last 2 years, according to the Missoula County Treasurer. It's one of the last affordable options to own in Missoula, although people still have to rent their lots. The [median price for a home in Missoula](#) for the first six months of 2021 was \$430,000, according to the Missoula Organization of Realtors. That's a 22.9% jump from the year before. The rental vacancy rate during that time was 1.6%.

Derie Kain manages Travois Village, another RV park in Missoula, and she's seen the growing demand for housing.

"We have 282 spaces, more inquiries than I can ever remember, like per day people calling," Kain says. "You see the ads go up on like Facebook or Craigslist and they're just only up for minutes."

Kain has owned the Travois Village with her husband since 1991.

"A lot of times we order homes from a manufacturer and put them on the lots and then sell them or typically, we'd do a lease with the option to buy, and those are all completely occupied as well," Kain says. Business is good for Kain, but she also knows that means it's tough for people who are out of options. "I think it's just going to get worse and worse because there's literally nothing out there for rentals, and what you can find is super expensive," she said. "It's just a lot of people can't afford that. I just think that's going to be a big, big issue here."

Jennifer Ballenger, who owns Jim and Mary's RV Park, agrees that there is a housing problem across all sectors, and thinks a lot about the aging population.

"Trailer courts have always had that low-income connotation, but there's also a whole demographic of older folks and they're just getting run out and overcharged more than they can afford."

Ballenger grew up in western Washington and traveled the country before arriving in Missoula in 1999. Her family was able to purchase the park from its previous owners in April 2000. The park has 70 total spaces. "I really do wonder what my responsibility is," Ballenger says. "If someone walked in here and said, 'Hey, we will give you \$10 million for this place and we're going to put up a Costco or mall or whatever they want to do.' What is my responsibility to people? I think I would just have to try to do right by everybody as best I could."

Ballenger has two children of her own and has seen multiple families leave the Missoula area due to the cost of living here.

"You cannot afford that level of wage to have a home, you know, live a decent life."  
Mobile home displacement in Missoula continues to grow.

*This story comes from a reporting partnership between the [University of Montana School of Journalism](#) and Montana Public Radio.*

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