

OPINION EXCHANGE

Homeowners who rent land need a chance to buy it

It would take away the fear of losing your home overnight.

By **Natividad Seefeld** | APRIL 1, 2021 — 5:30PM

Imagine waking up one morning to find out the land under your home was sold the night before. That's a daily concern for more than 180,000 Minnesotans living in manufactured home communities. Not long ago, I was one of those people living in fear.

I feared losing my community and my house. You see, as a homeowner in a manufactured housing community, I own my home but rent the land beneath it.

Those sleepless nights ended the day my neighbors and I voted to form a cooperative. We bought what was then Park Plaza Estates. Today Park Plaza Cooperative in Fridley is home to 83 families with a homeowner-elected volunteer board of directors.

Although my home and community are secure, I'm working with homeowners in other communities to make sure they have the same chance I did at local control. Policymakers are now discussing legislation that would give homeowners that chance.

[HF 112](https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/bill.php?f=HF112&y=2021&ssn=0&b=house) (<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/bill.php?f=HF112&y=2021&ssn=0&b=house>) passed committees in the House and Sen. Karin Housley, R-Stillwater, sponsored SF 1282.

The legislation is critical. It's not as simple as you would think to get the opportunity to purchase the land under your home. The legislation asks landowners of manufactured home communities for two things:

1. Let homeowners know if you're planning to sell.

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Some homeowners rent the land their home is on, which means that land can be sold to someone else.

2. Give homeowners 60 days to put together a competitive offer.

That's it. There is no requirement that landowners sell to homeowners, no special favors. We just ask that the homeowners' offer is considered just like any other offer.

Today 900 manufactured home communities across Minnesota face unique challenges. About 90% of residents own the home in which they live, but someone else owns the land. More and more, that someone is an out-of-state speculative buyer who sees our community as tiny items in a portfolio they trade on Wall Street.

In 2020 alone, 70% of Minnesota's manufactured homesites that sold went to out-of-state buyers. When investors swoop in they take control of property, the homeowners' future and some of the last affordable housing in the state.

I've lived in Park Plaza since November 1998. Before homeowners took over, repairs were always going to happen in the future. There were just few streetlights, no fire hydrants, but plenty of potholes. The water was always being turned off to do repairs.

We hardly could get landowners to spend money on maintenance, let alone investment in improvements.

That all changed in fall 2010 when we created Park Plaza Cooperative. With the help of Northcountry Cooperative Foundation, we bought the land and started our journey to control our finances, control our operations and manage a corporation now worth \$5.1 million.

In the past 10 years our community has invested \$1 million in infrastructure. We have new sewer and waterlines, including new main waterlines and readable meters at each home. We now have fire hydrants, more lights and best of all — new streets.

We did all that without raising lot rent. Homeowners in the community across the street pay lot rents of nearly \$150 more a month than we do. Taking profit margins out of rent certainly makes a difference. Our average rent increase is 2.5% per year since becoming a resident-owned community.

With the basic infrastructure under control, we looked toward enhancements. We got help to build an above-ground storm shelter and community center. But when the project was going cost more than we had anticipated, we had a vote. Community members voted to raise their rent by \$6.

We also have a new playground and, thanks to a partnership with Libraries Without Borders, we have an onsite library. Another partner, Manna Market, helped create an onsite free food day for the whole community.

It's been 10 years since homeowners took control and we're just getting started. There is still so much we can do, now that we know we will never be displaced.

Natividad Seefeld serves as president of the Park Plaza Cooperative board of directors. The Fridley, Minn., community is one of just nine resident-owned manufactured housing communities in Minnesota.