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'The ghetto of all ghettos'

Complaints mount against dilapidated mobile home park

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LAS VEGAS SUN



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The crumbling Sky-Vue Mobile Park, called by some of its residents the last step down before homelessness, has open sewers, faulty wiring and multiple other violations of health and safety codes spread throughout its 100-plus spaces on 4.8 acres at the north-central edge of Las Vegas.

"This is just reprehensible," said state Assemblywoman Chris Giunchigliani, D-Las Vegas. After receiving complaints about the trailer park at 15 West Owens, she visited it several times and took pictures of holes in floors, leaking sewage, and the operators of the park driving off in a Jaguar.

The park has been operating without a business license since October and has been under orders to install fire hydrants and make other safety improvements for more than 18 months, according to Las Vegas city officials and public records.

In addition, multiple inspections by the city since August, and more recently, by the state of Nevada and the Clark County Board of Health, noted faulty wiring, blocked exits, broken windows, and leaking sewer pipes and water lines upon which public health and safety officials now are focusing. Within

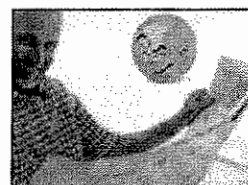


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the last week, the city of Las Vegas has taken the lead to coordinate a response to the situation. A Sun investigation of the public records shows that much more could have been done, much sooner, but nobody connected multiple reports in various agencies that, taken together, paint a picture of a slum that has been allowed to fester.

"I wish I could make a documentary. This is like another world here, circled by a fence. This is the ghetto of all ghettos," said Terry Bailey, 50, who said she lives at Sky-View with her mother.

The situation involves a delicate balance between property rights, due process, the rights of residents to live in a safe, clean environment, the reality of its status as a slum in a neglected part of town, and the lack of choices for the poor in Las Vegas -- if the park is shut down, many residents have no place to go, and no way to get there.

"If we have issues out there that are life-threatening and the park owners or people responsible are taking the attitude they don't want to fix it, we're not afraid to close the park," said Gary Childers, supervising compliance investigator for the Nevada Division of Manufactured Housing. That agency ordered repairs to the park Feb. 3, but gave the operators extensions on the completion deadlines.

But, Childers added, a closure "doesn't help the tenants -- they're (left) homeless -- and it doesn't help the park owner."

"Unfortunately, the nature of the beast is low-income, and this is inexpensive affordable-type housing that has been allowed to degenerate to unsafe conditions in some case, in a lot of cases, actually. But as bad as it may be, there's always somebody in need of it," Childers said.

Inspectors may not have been able to see how bad the overall situation at Sky-View was because they only focus on their specific jurisdictions -- for example, one department may examine sewage, while another may only be looking at conditions in the home, like broken windows or poor wiring.

And they are working with limited resources. Childers, for example, has two inspectors to look

after 132 trailer parks registered in Clark County.

David Semenza, who oversees 11 Las Vegas code enforcement inspectors, said "probably thousands" of homes or apartments in the city could be considered substandard. Still, even given the jurisdictional and resource constraints on various departments, "every jurisdiction has some culpability" in allowing Sky-Vue to have become what it is, Giunchigliani said. "There's a fundamental bureaucratic mess here."

At least four agencies have looked into the situation at Sky-Vue:

- The city of Las Vegas Fire Department has records showing the park owners were ordered to install fire hydrants and perform other safety-related improvements going back to April 2000, and a final notice was issued Feb. 7, 2001, to the Karp Family Trust, which owned the park at that time. Fire officials issued another order, on Oct. 31, 2002, to an engineer hired by the management. That order gave them six months to complete the work. But the work has yet to be completed.
- Because of the fire safety issues, the park has not had a business license since October, when its last request for a temporary, six-month license was turned down by the city. The city attorney's office now is reviewing legal action, which could result in closing the park.
- The city of Las Vegas Neighborhood Services Department has records of five complaints filed in August, October and January, including one notation in August that the state would be notified, which apparently did not happen. The city records also show an Aug. 25 complaint that was closed when the inspector noted a problem as fixed, but there is no record showing that the repairs actually happened.
- The state Division of Manufactured Housing was called in December, according to Childers, and issued a corrective order in February. The park operators did not meet deadlines issued in that order, although Childers said they did ask for extensions and now are meeting their deadlines.

- Clark County Health District records show violations recorded in almost every inspection of Sky-Vue since 1997. The district completed a routine review in November that found 13 trailers damaged or unliveable. The next review was to take place in the middle of April, but inspectors went there last week for the follow-up. In addition, the district's solid waste inspectors went there last week, and ordered immediate repairs to the leaking sewer pipes.

Residents at Sky-Vue complain of the presence of drug dealers and hookers. One public official, from a rough neighborhood in New York City, said he eyed the assortment of characters loitering in and around Sky-Vue one recent afternoon and decided his team of inspectors would come back another day. The woman who has been the most vocal about conditions at the park, Beth Jones, says she has been verbally abused and physically attacked.

Management woes

The park manager's response has been to call her crazy.

Sky-Vue is next to the Salvation Army, where hundreds of homeless line up each day for meals and clothes, and down the street from Catholic Charities and Shade Tree, a women and children's shelter. Sky-Vue is filled with dead trees (a fire hazard), shabby trailers, and people trying to get by.

"We're real people. Once you get past the gate and look in the trailers, we have families here," said Jones, 58, who managed the park for a short time in December and January and has been trying to get the authorities to do something about the living conditions.

The owner of record with the county assessor is T & B Del Corp. Tracy Del Fante of Las Vegas is listed as president, secretary and treasurer of the corporation, according to state records. The property -- 4.8 acres, valued by the county at \$358,883.75 -- was sold to T & B in December, according to county records, which show the owner prior to T & B as being CCSD Corp.

CCSD is registered in Nevada to David Dimarco. State corporate records show that David Dimarco is

a partner of Del Fante's in several other companies registered in Nevada.

Sandi Dimarco, David's wife, is serving as the on-site manager at Sky-View and said she is trying furiously to repair the park. She initially referred questions to a man she said was the owner, Andy in New York.

Andy is Andy Dimarco, David's father. When reached by telephone, Andy Dimarco identified himself as the operator of the park, not the owner. He declined to name the owner.

In a statement faxed to the Sun on March 26, Andy Dimarco said that "great progress has been made" since his daughter-in-law took over management of the park two months ago.

Dimarco's letter states that electrical and gas services have been inspected and updated, that demolition of older trailers is under way, that a security gate soon will be built, and that management is in "close communications with all city and manufactured housing authorities on all work being done."

The statement does not refer to the order to install fire hydrants, or the response to previous orders issued by the city since August, or the health district findings.

It closes by stating that "we have had some obstacles to hurdle with our past management problems, but hopefully, all of that is behind us now."

Tracy Del Fante, reached by telephone March 31, said he owns the property, but "they (Dimarcos) are in charge of the park."

Del Fante said the fire hydrants ordered by the city would cost tens, or even hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"There's no money to do it," Del Fante said. He said the park declined into its current state because of "money. If you're not taking any money out of it, and putting money in, you don't have any left. What do you do?"

He said he did not have the financial records available to show how much the park was losing.

When asked who was responsible for fixing the property, he said "whoever is down there running it. I'm hoping somebody is going to buy me out of it. I don't want anything to do with that thing."

He said residents often damage the property, or refuse to pay rent and call authorities when managers attempt to evict them.

"There are people down there who are honest and have no where to go," Del Fante said. "Others get money from the state, and it runs out, and they try to kick them out and they call everybody."

"You got 10 people who don't want to pay and you got 50 people paying the bills. So what do you do, throw a bunch of people out on the street? That's what I see. I put up with this stuff all the time."

Sandi Dimarco said on March 31 that she had 35 evictions under way. She said some people owed up to \$1,800.

"I have a good staff, and we can't get stuff done as quickly as people are demanding," she said. "It's hard to get everything done at once."

She said two trailers have been removed and a handful more would soon be moved out of the park. She also said that she is having a gate installed "and that will stop a lot of the traffic that comes in. They come and break into a lot of these homes."

She said CCSD, the company operating the park, has been involved for about a year and a half at Sky-Vue. She said the park had been "losing money monthly, and a lot of that is management."

But Dimarco said the complaints could turn out to be "a blessing in disguise," because it let everyone involved know exactly what is happening and what needs to be done to fix things.

She refused to allow a reporter to visit residents in their homes, saying the park is private property.

Cheapest place to live

Jones said she and other Sky-Vue residents are "stuck" there.

"We came here, all of us, because this was the cheapest place to come. It was supposed to be a stopping off place," Jones said.

"This is where we go when they kick us out (everywhere else). But you know what? We're alive," she said, shaking, tears coming out.

She said people pay between \$300-\$500 per month to live at the park. Jones, who said she supports herself by doing odd jobs, pays \$350.

Ownership of the trailers is unclear. Some are rented to the residents. Others are allegedly lease-to-own arrangements. Jones said she tried to manage the park after the previous manager left unexpectedly. But Jones' tenure as manager only lasted from Dec. 2 to Jan. 28, she said.

She said the day she quit was "the day they put people in the firetraps." Jones said her boss wanted to move people into one of the worst trailers at the park.

"I stood in front with a baseball bat and wouldn't let them move in," she said.

That day she called city authorities, which prompted a visit the next day. That inspection led to the most recent city order and to the Feb. 3 order by the state's Division of Manufactured Housing to fix a long list of problems.

Jones said she saw similarities between the Sky-Vue situation and the one that culminated with a March 11 fire that killed a 12-year-old girl who had been living in a substandard, illegally occupied trailer behind a home in the 1600 block of Ogden Avenue. City inspectors had received previous complaints about that property and had visited it prior to the fire. The homeowner had been warned not to let anyone live in that trailer.

After Jones read about that case, she called the newspaper. And after the Sun began asking authorities about Sky-Vue, Sandi Dimarco distributed a letter telling residents Jones was trying

to get the park shut down.

Dimarco said residents have a right to know what's happening, but Jones worried that the letter puts her in danger.

Giunchigliani said "if anything happens to her (Jones) I will refer it immediately to Metro." It was Jones, a former constituent, who called Giunchigliani to the park last week.

Jones said she's been attacked already. Someone came up behind her last week and hit her, she said. But she did not file a police report. She points to the sky and says, "He has my back."

She prays that her tiny, decades-old trailer won't be consumed by an electrical fire.

Hers is not the only one with possible electrical problems. Bill Lowman, 28, who was living at Sky-Vue as recently as last month, said he was worried about water leaks in his trailer, especially one by the breaker box above the kitchen sink.

"If you touch the box it will shock the (expletive) out of you," Lowman said.

On March 22 he was under a 24-hour eviction notice because "they said they wouldn't fix it until I pay, and I won't pay until they fix it. So we're at a stalemate."

'A little latitude'

Neighborhood Services inspection chief Semenza said Lowman's trailer was part of the Jan. 29 complaint. At the time of that complaint, the city apparently had two other complaints open at Sky-Vue.

Semenza said a new computer program installed in the summer might have led to glitches in the reports as inspectors got used to the new system.

Semenza said his department now is running weekly reports to ensure inspections don't stay open without follow up. He said that procedure began about a month ago.

As for the fire code violations at Sky-Vue, those

have been known to authorities for more than three years, based on Las Vegas Fire Department records. The department has issued several orders demanding that the park install fire hydrants, modify the roads to support "fire apparatus," and put addresses on each trailer.

Fire Department spokesman Tim Szymanski said "We gave them a little latitude. We don't want to say there's no fire problem there, or we wouldn't be ordering a hydrant. But it wasn't a life and death situation like a blocked exit."

He said the department approved deadline extensions, in part, because the park owners had plans drawn up to do the work but apparently didn't have the money to make the improvements immediately. "We didn't want to shut down the mobile home park and have those people (the residents) displaced and put on the street, yet we want to keep the mobile home park safe, so we said we'd work with them," Szymanski said.

He said that eventually the department no longer could accept excuses.

That's why the park's business license wasn't renewed in October.

And yet the park remains open

'Horrendous'

Las Vegas City Councilman Lawrence Weekly represents Ward 5, which includes Sky-Vue.

"The conditions at Sky-Vue Mobile Park are horrendous to me," Weekly said last week. "I'm outraged that the people who own it would allow people to live in those type of conditions. No one deserves to live in those conditions, not in America."

He said the city was going to take action to ensure the place is cleaned up and residents do not suffer. "I hope this will send a clear message to property owners that you cannot take advantage of people struggling to make ends meet," Weekly said Monday. He also said that one entity alone cannot be held accountable for the state of Sky-Vue Mobile Park.

"It's a conglomerate of everybody," Weekly said. "When you start talking about private property, there's only so much you can do and then you have to go through due process."

Giunchigliani said something needs to be done, without "booting them (residents) out on the street."

"I'm confident with Weekly and the health district and others we'll make sure these people are properly cared for," she said.

The long-term solution is more teeth in laws regulating small trailer parks, and for that matter, substandard housing in the valley, she said. "There should be an assertive, pro-active way to go in and start analyzing all these parks, with the goal of not throwing people on the street and adding to homelessness," Giunchigliani said.

"I came home last night in tears," she said after one of her trips to Sky-Vue. "They're poor people and they should not be treated this way. They (parkowners and operators) are totally in violation of everything, but what do you do? There's no low-income housing in this community."

Sky-Vue "is just the tip of the iceberg," she said.

"I think there are a lot of smaller trailer parks, separate from mobile home parks, that have been overlooked," she said.

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