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Sioux City Journal

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WHERE YOUR STORY LIVES

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'THREE-MONTH TORNADO'



JESSE BROTHERS, SIOUX CITY JOURNAL

Larry Tech, center, talks about the possibility of moving his mobile home to a new location in Arnolds Park. Residents at this Arnolds Park, Iowa mobile home park are having their leases terminated because the park has been sold.

Arnolds Park mobile homeowners have 90 days to leave

JARED MCNETT
jmcnett@siouxcityjournal.com

ARNOLDS PARK — Renee Comstock thought she'd found home.

Five years ago, she used the lion's share of her savings to buy a 366-square-foot mobile home and lease a lot at the Okoboji Trailer Park and Storage at 244 Highway 71. When she was a kid growing up near Denison, Iowa, Com-

stock and her family would make the two-hour journey up to Okoboji in the summer to fish, ride the wooden "Legend Roller Coaster" at the Arnolds Park Amusement Park and visit the historic Abbie Gardner Sharp Cabin.

"And then I just decided I'm going to live up here," Comstock said.

First she settled in nearby Spirit Lake, Iowa, and spent about 20 years at Polaris Industries,

where she worked on the line building UTVs. Later she took a job with the Northwest Humane Society.

Finally, she got a mobile home in the Okoboji Trailer Park, right across the street from the amusement park she enjoyed so much as a young girl.

Please see **ARNOLDS PARK**, Page A5

District rescinds gun policy after insurance cut

CAITLIN YAMADA
cyamada@siouxcityjournal.com

CHEROKEE, Iowa — The Cherokee Community School District has rescinded its weapons policy.

In an emergency school board meeting Friday morning, the school board

decided to rescind a policy — that would arm teachers — due to loss of insurance coverage and no viable new insurers.

"We recommend that without the alternative property coverage option, the district should consider rescinding the armed staff policy and seek a reinstatement of their cancellation with EMC," said the district's insurance broker Bruce Dagal of Central Insurance.

The board voted unanimously to rescind the weapons policy they put in place in October 2022.

"I reluctantly made a motion that

we rescind the policy," said Board Vice President Angie Anderson. "No individual other than law enforcement shall be authorized to carry firearms on school grounds."

Please see **POLICY**, Page A6

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The Mini

Wouldn't it be nice if motor vehicle drivers in Sioux City complied with the law and stopped when people are in crosswalks everywhere like they do at the Farmer's Market. — **Robert DeSmidt, Sioux City**

Weather

Severe morning t-storm
High 83 • Low 60
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EQUAL HOUSING OPPORTUNITY

Arnolds Park

From A1

Thirty-seven places

Now age 60, Comstock says the idyllic memories of the Iowa Great Lakes have started to fade.

A few of the older family run cafés and smaller tourist shops she would frequent with her mother and father have been bulldozed. Not long after she moved to the mobile home park, Comstock began to deal with a combination of heart and kidney failure. According to a 2021 Lancet study, the median survival rate for those who have both is a little more than two years.

“I can’t lift very heavy things or mow the lawn. I tried to scoop snow but had to stop because my heart started racing. Going up and down stairs is difficult. It’s a lot like that,” Comstock said. With those impediments, she still manages to look out for the Himalayan cat that wanders the neighborhood.

Those are all factors Comstock now has to keep in mind as she again begins the search for a new home.

On May 1, the Okoboji Trailer Park and Storage was sold to Midwest Partners Development LLC. The same day, the new ownership group, which has a P.O. box in Arnolds Park, sent a letter to the residents of the dozen-plus mobile homes saying their leases would be terminated, effective Aug. 4. The group also provided a list of 37 places to possibly move to.

In an email to The Journal, Midwest Partners Development said its goal is to “provide a positive impact on the local community by cleaning up this area with multi-family housing and/or commercial development.”

The response continued: “It might not be what some of these tenants want, but I would encourage anyone to take a drive through the property as it sits currently and see the deplorable conditions some of these mobile homes and property are in. I’m sure you have seen in the local news/paper how many tenants here are behind on taxes, but over 80% are also behind on multiple months of rent. This makes the business and property unsustainable going forward as it currently sits.”

“I’m pretty angry about it,” Comstock said. “I have no family up here. I have nowhere to go. I have no money because I’m on disability. So what am I supposed to do?”

What counts as new?

A number of other residents, and even a local pastor, are with Comstock in her anger.

Larry Tech, 74, grew up in Denison. From 1969 through 1972, Tech served in the Navy. A major duty of his was to bake for the troops fighting in Vietnam. Tech hadn’t baked a day in his life before he traveled the 8,000 miles from Iowa to the Southeast Asian country.

“I remember the first sheet pan cake I made. I thought it was pretty good,” Tech said. “I mean, I didn’t taste it.”

Later Tech and his wife, Shirley, found work at the Denison Job Corps Center. He taught construction for over 30 years and she was a nurse.

“I just loved teaching the kids. That’s what kept me there so long,” said Tech. He and Shirley loved being around kids, and became a foster family for about three decades. Later, Tech said, they adopted their grandkids. In time, Larry and Shirley decided to retire and move to Arnolds Park.

He said his mobile home in the park is a 2003 model. There’s a patio extension coming off the unit. It’s big enough to have room for two four-chair tables, two white rocking chairs, several plants, an American flag and a dog named Gibson.

One of the things that dawned on Tech when he got his notice is that Gibson wouldn’t be able to go with him. He has called a few of the mobile home park options listed on the letter provided by Midwest Partners Development.

“One is Center Lake. And then they’ve got one by Hy-Vee. Hy-Vee has got like seven or eight spots. Center Lake only had a couple of spots. But he’s only going to accept new trailers there,” Tech said.

Asked if he knows what qualifies as “new,” Tech said he didn’t know what the date would need to be. “Why go by the date? I drive by (Renee Comstock’s) trailer and she takes very good care of it.”

Even though they’re on Social Security, Tech said he and his wife are more worried about others in the park than they are about themselves.

“We’re fine,” he said.

Tech said he’s bothered though by the timing.

“Why wouldn’t he let us know



JESSE BROTHERS PHOTOS, SIOUX CITY JOURNAL

Phillip Janssen mows his neighbor Renee Comstock’s yard. Janssen is one of the younger residents living at Okoboji Trailer Park and Storage and said he helps out with a number of chores.

Where the park is

Okoboji Trailer Park residents live across the road from the Arnolds Park Amusement and have clusters of condos nearby. They fear that’s what their homes will turn into.



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a year ahead of time?” Tech asked about a property manager of the mobile home park. “Because most of us might stop paying rent or something. He wanted to keep us hanging on.” The manager declined to give comment, on the record, to The Sioux City Journal.

Fellow mobile home owner Lana Bowman, 58, has resided for the past 13 years in a mobile home formerly owned Tech.

“We come in here with my foster kids and we cleaned it up. I put a new heater and air conditioner in it. I sold it, on contract, to a young man, I don’t know who bought it after all that but then she put new windows in it. I mean this is a beautiful home,” Tech said.

“And it’s just going to be demolished,” Bowman responded.

Bowman grew up in South Sioux City. She’d never visited Okoboji until she and her ex-husband visited for their honeymoon in 1994. It made an impression on her; she has now lived in the region for almost a quarter century.

“I love the lake,” she said.

Bowman is a kind of social connector for tenants. She brought in other residents facing lease terminations to share documents with one another and vent their frustrations about what they’re going through. On the Fourth of July, Bowman, along with her dog, Chloe, and two birds, Charlie and Rocko, host a party with food and fireworks.

Even when there isn’t a party where they socialize, Comstock said residents keep in touch with one another.

“We all watch out for each other. And if there’s something different, one person usually knows about it and says something to somebody else so we can figure out if there’s something going on. It’s a community,” she said.

“All of that is just going to go away,” Bowman sighed.

‘A slap in the face’

Phillip Janssen, one of the younger residents of the park at age 27, said he told management he’d need a year to move out because he owns and operates two companies from home — a cab service called Clutch Cabs, and Advanced Lawn Care, which, as the name implies, does yard work.

“This location is the best place for the cab service because it’s literally right down the road (from Arnolds Park Amusement Park). (We) pick them up, take them to where they gotta go and they don’t have to wait very long,” Janssen said. “I’ve got years of paperwork sitting in filing cabinets that needs to be pulled. I’m always having to go back and look at those papers to figure out what we did. And



Lana Bowman, 58, enjoys the porch at her mobile home park. By her estimation, it would cost around \$16,000 to move her home out of Okoboji Trailer Park and Storage.



Renee Comstock refers to a notice of lease termination which she received from the new owners of an Arnolds Park, Iowa mobile home park. Under the terms, residents need to vacate by August 4.

you can’t just throw that stuff in a box.”

A Rock Valley, Iowa, native, Janssen said he visited the Okoboji area when he was a child; it left enough of an impression that he moved there full time in 2018 and put most of his savings, about \$16,000, into the unit he now lives in with his wife, Katherine, 27.

“If you saw the pictures as I got it, it was non-livable. I literally gutted that thing from front to back,” Janssen said.

When he’s not tending to his lawncare business or the taxicab company, Janssen’s likely to be duck or pheasant hunting with one of the dogs he owns, tinkering with the piles of scrap he has near his unit or helping out other residents however he can.

Now he has to add to his to-do list: Looking for a new residence.

Janssen said the movers he called wouldn’t be available until October or November, several months after the termination date of Aug. 4.

“They’re telling me I can go down by Hy-Vee,” Janssen said, referring to the A and K Mobile Home Park, one of the 37 options on the list. Others include mobile home parks in Lake Park, Iowa, Milford, Iowa, Spirit Lake, Iowa,

Wahpeton, Iowa, and West Okoboji, Iowa.

Multiple state parks appear on the list including Marble Beach, Emerson Bay and Elinor Bedell. The latter’s website indicates that options there can run \$26 a night for a standard, full hook-up in the campground.

When asked by The Journal if the state parks appearing on the list were meant as short-term options, Midwest Partners Development declined to answer directly. But representatives did discuss their process and their plans for early August.

“We have followed all state laws and given them their 90-day notice, which is 3x times as long as their lease states (30-days). Again, these are lot leases, and not rentals of homes or apartments. There are several government agencies out there that can help with relocation if needed and we encourage residents to seek that out during the 90-days. I would encourage you to go see the deplorable conditions this property and some of the mobile homes are in,” Midwest Partners Development said in the email reply. “We have plans early August to start the cleanup and excavation of the property and all tenants will need to be out

then. We also have utility companies who will be there putting in all new infrastructure (sewer, water, electric), and we will need the property vacant in order to do this.”

Comstock called the inclusion of parks on the list a “slap in face.” “It’s an insult,” said Chris St. Clair, a pastor at Calvary United Methodist Church who’s preached on the topic and is assisting mobile home park residents with whatever they need.

Mobile home legislation

According to reporting by The Journal’s Des Moines Bureau, in 2019, about 45.6% of the state’s lots identified by the Iowa’s non-partisan legal and fiscal analysis agency were owned by out-of-state companies.

That year, one out-of-state owner of several parks in Iowa increased rents 24 to 69%, the Des Moines Bureau reported last year.

In May 2022, the Iowa legislature passed a bill, later signed by Gov. Kim Reynolds, requiring mobile homeowners be given an extra month’s notice of a rent increase or when a landlord cancels the lease agreement.