

Losing Ground – study addresses Boise’s mobile home crisis

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In their study, Boise State researchers (from left) Susan Mason, Roy Rodenhiser and Todd Shallat surveyed mobile home park residents, examined the history and economics of manufactured housing, and identified the best policy options being used by other cities.

Rising land values within Boise city limits are leading not only to increased property tax bills, but also to a disturbing crisis in affordable housing for the one in 25 residents who live in mobile homes.

On the heels of several mobile home park closures, Boise State researchers launched a policy study in fall 2006 to consider plausible solutions. Social science professors Todd Shallat, Susan Mason and Roy Rodenhiser teamed with graduate students and the city of Boise’s housing manager to survey mobile home park residents, examine the history and economics of manufactured housing, and identify the best policy options being used by other cities.

The result is “Mobile Home Living in Boise: Its Uncertain Future and Alarming Decline.” The report puts a human face on the problem of affordable housing, while outlining several strategies for the Boise City Council’s consideration.

In the early 1970s, Boise was the second-largest mobile home manufacturing hub west of the Mississippi,

says Shallat, a history professor and director of the Center for Idaho History and Politics. For thousands of Boiseans, mobile homes offered a shot at the American dream of homeownership.

“The mobile home was once the nation’s most reliable source of unsubsidized low-income housing,” Shallat says. “Today the equation has changed.”

Two-thirds of mobile home occupants own their home, but lease the land it sits on. With wages growing at much slower rates than land values, homeowners are often forced from their homes because they can’t afford to purchase or rent new lots elsewhere. Even if they are able to find a new lot, the \$10,000 cost of relocating a mobile home is prohibitive. Added to these concerns is the lack of a provision in state law requiring mobile home park owners to maintain mobile home units or pay relocation expenses should the park close.

“We don’t want to burden society,”

Thunderbird Park resident Bob McCuster told researchers. “We’re independent. We don’t want to apply for subsidies or public assistance, but we can’t walk away from our homes.”

Despite the issues, many mobile home dwellers defend their choice of housing as an affordable and less regulated alternative to an apartment, which also typically does not offer a yard or garden space. Still others report that they purchased a mobile home as a step toward eventually owning a site-built home, but then found that finances or the difficulty of selling a manufactured home prevented them from achieving that goal.

Researchers hope the report will be the first of a series of interdisciplinary investigations on metropolitan issues. Future topics could include transportation, land-use zoning, homelessness,

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policing, tourism, regional governance, water quality and foothills conservation.

A pdf version of the report can be found at http://www.boisestate.edu/history/idaho/MobileHomes_Boise.pdf.



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