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# HOUSING: Community living

## Resident-owned mobile home parks foster friendships

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Kenneth Thompson, 34, stands outside his home in ANDCO Mobile Home Cooperative in Highgate.



By **Elodie Reed**  
Staff Writer  
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**HIGHGATE/SWANTON** — In keeping with the American dream, home ownership is something most people want. Buying a home in a nice neighborhood that has community spirit — well, that's pretty great, too.

Two mobile home parks in Franklin County are proving both are possible for people on a tighter budget.

ANDCO Mobile Home Cooperative, located off of Frontage

### 'We're going to



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Road in Highgate, and Homestead Acres, off of Bushey Road in Swanton, are cooperatively owned mobile home parks. In the past three years, the residents at each collectively bought the land their homes sit on, and now they are in charge of its management and upkeep.

While a majority of both parks' residents owned their mobile homes prior to the land purchase, recent door-to-door interviews with the *Messenger* revealed that joint ownership has added something new to each park. Not only are residents directly involved in their park through homeowners association meetings, voting on financial decisions or doing tasks like shoveling or mowing lawns, but they also come closer together, forming a real community.

"Until the co-op, we never met," ANDCO secretary Sally Sheets, 56, said of her neighbor at the other end of the park, 85-year-old Moe Audette, who Sheets now visits frequently. "The co-op really brought the community together."

## Mobile in Vermont

The two local cooperatively owned mobile home parks are among 27 total parks in Franklin County and the 244 in the state. Only four other parks in Vermont are cooperatively owned, though in neighboring New Hampshire, there are more than 100.

Sarah Woodward, the director of the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity (CVOEO)'s Mobile Home Program, said that while non-profits manage around 50 of the state's parks and landlords own the rest, the option for co-operative ownership is available for any park that is about to be sold.

Those residents looking to collectively buy the property can go to the Mobile Home Program, which helps find financing for the initial purchase.

In addition, Woodward said the program, which has been in existence since 1987, also helps individuals living in any Vermont mobile home that may be looking for resources, having trouble with their landlord over land or utilities, or wanting to know their rights.

"We help people navigate how to get problems addressed," Woodward said.

Woodward added that a lot of the issues her office sees in mobile home parks are mitigated by collective ownership, where people can control how the property is managed and what kind of community they live in while continuing to have affordable housing – the state's average lot lease at \$310 per month.

"[A co-op] is more democratically run and led," Woodward said. "It empowers people to kind of control their own destiny."

## ANDCO

In the words of 67-year-old resident and former NASCAR driver Marcel Richards, ANDCO Mobile Home Cooperative in Highgate has been "working out pretty good" since the residents of the nine-lot park purchased the property in January of this year.

**start cleaning up; it feels a lot better."**

- Kenneth Thompson,  
ANDCO resident

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The previous landlord, Regina Anderson, had decided to sell the mobile home park or close it last year, so with financial help from Cooperative Fund of New England, the residents bought their park's property.

"[Legally], she had to give us this option," said Sheets of the cooperative purchase. "We took her up on it."

The residents formed a five-member board with a president, secretary, treasurer and two at-large members, and they now meet once a month to discuss and vote on items for the co-op. Everyone in the park pays a \$300 lot lease to the co-op.

During recent interviews, many of the residents said the park physically had not changed all that much after the purchase, since the previous landlord had been attentive and friendly and the park quiet and peaceful.

Richards, for instance, has been living on his lot for 12 years and joined the board after the purchase. A retiree, he collects rare NASCAR items and spends time with his dog, Chico, and his grandkids and great-grandkids when they visit. While he said he likes the co-op, Richards also said it hasn't created a noticeable difference.

"Everything's been pretty normal," he said last week.

What perhaps has been the biggest transition is that the residents pitched in with upkeep – weed-whacking, removing trash, laying down sand and gravel for a new driveway, improving a picnic site and pond area – which has inevitably led to beautifying the area and neighbors working together.

"It is getting better," said resident of six years, Kenneth Thompson, 34. "We're going to start cleaning up; it feels a lot better."

While walking around the park and chatting with her neighbors, Sheets reminded most of them about the tasks they needed to get done. For instance, she asked Thompson, a roofer who lives with his partner and two kids, to bring the trash to the dump.

Chris Woodward, the 20-year-old nephew of Debra Craig, a 59-year-old resident of the park for 10 years, said he's always busy helping around. "I do what I can to help [my aunt]," Woodward said. "It's all love."

Woodward, who recently moved to Highgate from the State of Georgia, said he has met the other people living at ANDCO through pitching in.

People getting to know each other better has become a trend lately, said Craig, who is also the co-op's treasurer.

"It's different – you do have more interaction with other people in the park," he said.

"Everybody kept to themselves [before]," Sheets said.

For instance, Moe Audette, an 85-year-old retiree who lives in a large lot at the end of the park, hadn't met any of his neighbors before this year. He's lived in the park for 32 years.



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"I never met any of them," Audette said. "I don't remember names," he added, "[but] any of them come."

Sitting in his living room, surrounded by numerous photographs of family and friends covering his walls, Audette said, "I'm happy here."

## Homestead Acres

While being good neighbors has always been a tradition at Homestead Acres mobile home park, having a good landlord has not necessarily been the case, said some. According to co-op president Henry Benedict, the former park landlord, a Burlington company, did not manage the property's 30 lots very well. Repairs were left undone, rent was raised without explanation, and rules were changed abruptly.

"[They] didn't like to repair anything," said Benedict last week. "It's been a battle."

When the previous owner decided to sell Homestead Acres in December of 2011, Benedict and other residents jumped at the opportunity. They financed the purchase through ROC (Resident Owned Communities) USA, and the financial institution continues to help the co-op out.

"If it wasn't for them, we probably wouldn't have the place," Benedict said. He added that because all the residents at Homestead Acres get along fairly well, it wasn't too hard to convince everybody to buy the park. With the risk of having another bad landlord, choosing co-operative ownership was the better option.

"Everything would have stayed the same," said co-op Vice President Bruce Snider, 35. While he and Benedict said they, their secretary, treasurer, and at-large board member take on a fair share of responsibilities, other residents pitch in.

"[We do] pretty much everything from mowing to plowing to paperwork to finances," said Snider. He added that finding the money to do necessary repairs – such as \$47,000 worth of work on a pump station – can be difficult, but the co-op receives help from Woodward. The co-op's homeowner's association, which most residents are a part of, also voted to raise lot rent by \$10 to \$385 per month to help with upkeep.

"It's tough, it's a lot of work," said Snider. "We all seem to pull through and get the job done."

Benedict added, "At least we have the say in what's going on."

Walking through the park several weeks ago, the atmosphere was friendly, homes were nicely kept with flowers blooming in many lawns, and everyone knew everyone else. Robin Simino, 32, his fiancée Deanna Reynolds, 28, and her two young children had just bought their mobile home the previous night and were moving in.

Simino said he and Reynolds chose to live in Homestead Acres because it was co-operatively owned, even if the lot rent was a little more expensive.

"We like it here," he said. "It's a higher lot rent, but we picked this one [because the money] stays in the community."

Simino added, "We actually have a say in what's going on."

John Albertelli, 57 and a resident of seven years, said he usually attends all of the homeowner's association meetings with the co-op board. He added that he likes where he lives, not only for the good neighbors and peaceful atmosphere, but also because he can be independent.

"I have my own place," Albertelli said. "I can hang a picture on the wall without going through Congress to do it."

Longtime resident Phyllis Turner, who gave her age as "old," said that it's not only great for the park's homeowners to be in charge of where they live, but that the collective ownership of Homestead Acres also brings more people together through meetings, upkeep tasks, and caring about where they live.

"It's a community," Turner said.

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This is a nice explanation of how co-ops work and what the benefit is. Thanks for the attention to something that's working for people!

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