

U.S.

Mobile Home Park Owners Can Spoil An Affordable American Dream

December 26, 2016 1:32 PM ET

Heard on [All Things Considered](#)



[DANIEL ZWERDLING](#)

This story is the first in a two-part report on conditions at mobile home parks in the U.S. Today's piece focuses on what happens when corporate park owners fail to take care of their communities. Tomorrow, we'll look at what happens when residents are able to take ownership over their community.

Since she was a teenager, Dawn Tachell has yearned for her own tiny piece of America. She's had a tough life: She ran away from home when she was 16; she squatted for a while in a boxcar; she joined the Navy and did repair work on submarines. And finally, she thought she had made it when she bought a small home in the community of Syringa, Idaho, with spectacular views of the wheat fields and mountains.

"My dream was to own my own home," says Tachell, who runs a greenhouse for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Wind chimes hanging from her front porch serenade us as she shows off her rose bushes and lilac and pear trees.

Syringa is barely a five- to 10-minute drive from the college town of Moscow, Idaho, with its supermarkets, shopping malls, football stadium and hospital. Still, deer, moose and flocks of Canada geese parade past Tachell's kitchen windows.

When she bought the home 13 years ago, it cost \$11,000.

One of her neighbors, Robert Bonsall, also thought he was living his dream after he purchased a house in Syringa about 30 years ago.



Dawn Tachell (right) lives with her husband, Trapper. She says owning the home she bought for \$11,000 has been both a blessing and a curse.

Jed Conklin for NPR

"I could afford to buy it, even though I was a graduate student," he says.

From the outside, Bonsall's home looks much like the others in the neighborhood. But inside, he has a meditation room, complete with a miniature Zen rock garden and tea ceremony set. Since he paid off his mortgage decades ago, Bonsall, now a research administrator at Washington State University, says he has invested money and bought a boat on a lake.

Tachell and Bonsall say living in Syringa has been a blessing — but over the years, it has also become a curse. Since the 1980s, this community of roughly 100 houses has been plagued repeatedly by drinking water problems — including periods with contaminated water or no water at all. Rivers of raw sewage have occasionally gushed out of the ground and formed stinky ponds around homes. One resident has filled a cardboard box with videocassettes that he shot to document some of the incidents. Conditions in the neighborhood have become so bad that some people have abandoned their houses and moved out.

Absentee "lord of the manor"



The Syringa Mobile Home Park, with views of Moscow Mountain, is located a few miles from downtown Moscow, Idaho.

Jed Conklin for NPR

Residents say there's one main reason why they have had problems for so many years: Syringa is a mobile home park.

The federal government estimates there are more than 8 million "manufactured houses" (which is what the government has called mobile homes built since 1976). Housing specialists say they play an important role in "boosting affordable home ownership opportunities," according to a Ford Foundation report.

But the decades-old saga of Syringa Mobile Home Park and other evidence suggest that the legal and financial ways in which manufactured housing communities are set up often turn the residents into victims.

Carolyn Carter, an attorney and deputy director of the National Consumer Law Center based in Boston, says the heart of the problem with manufactured home communities "is that the residents don't own or control the land beneath their homes."

When you buy a home in a manufactured housing community, you own only the home's structure — the walls, roof and floor. But a private company or investor owns all the land.



Dawn Tachell looks at the trash and debris that have collected in her community. Conditions in the neighborhood have become so bad that some people have abandoned their houses and moved out.
Jed Conklin for NPR

Homeowners pay rent to hook up the house there. Typically, the community owner, not the local government, is also responsible for its roads and utilities. The less money the community owner spends maintaining them, the more profit their business can make.

The owner is the "lord of the manor," Carter says, "and basically doesn't have to pay much attention to the folks who are living there."

Of course, there can be water and sewage problems in traditional neighborhoods, too. "But you elect the public officials who oversee them, and so you can hold those officials accountable," Carter says.

The chronic problems at Syringa echo what has been happening at manufactured housing communities across the country.

The director of Ohio's Environmental Protection Agency, Craig Butler, told NPR that the agency is currently fighting the owners of more than 20 manufactured housing parks over drinking water problems in that state alone.



The community center at the Syringa Mobile Home Park has been closed and the pool once used by its residents has shut down and is now filled with scum.

Jed Conklin for NPR

Those owners "are very happy to be able, on a monthly basis, to receive rent checks from all of the folks that live in a manufactured home park, but not continue to think that they have a long-term [obligation] to maintain those assets," Butler says.

The Manufactured Housing Institute, the industry group that represents owners of manufactured housing parks, declined to give NPR an interview, but sent a written statement:

"The overwhelming majority of manufactured housing communities across the country are well maintained and continue to offer many benefits to residents, including affordable home ownership," it states.

"Without water for 90 days"

People who grew up in Syringa talk about the "good old days."

"Thirty years ago, it was a nice place to be," says Latah County Commissioner Dave McGraw, sitting in his office in the county courthouse in Moscow, Idaho. "We'd go out

for parties and family gatherings, and we used to go swimming at their indoor swimming pool out there. People wouldn't be ashamed to live out there."



(Left) Latah County Commissioner Dave McGraw remembers Syringa Mobile Home Park as a nice place when he was a child. He's now working to get the park to fix the water and sewage problems. (Right) Moscow is home to the University of Idaho and has a downtown neighborhood surrounded by rolling farm fields and mountains.

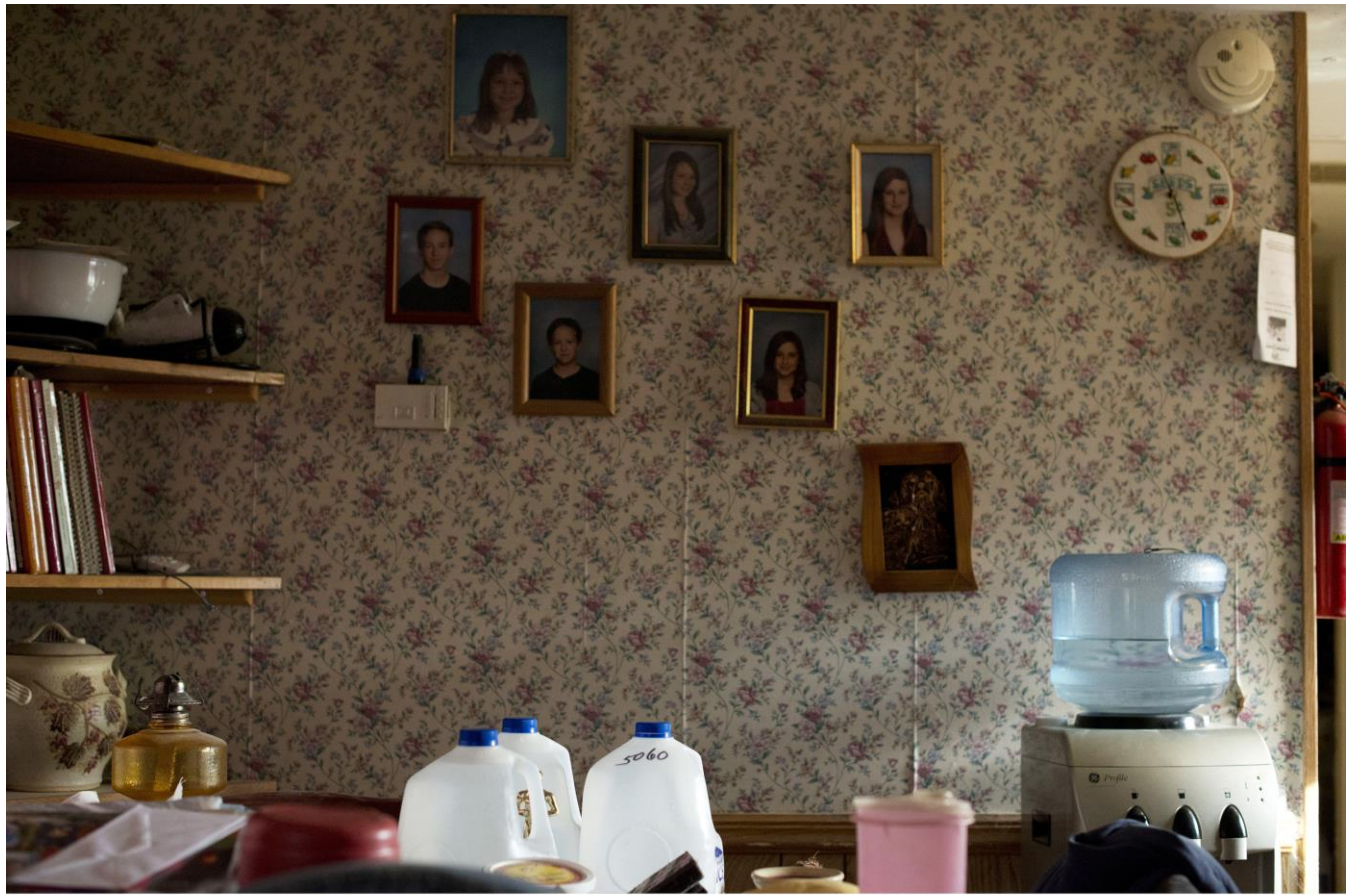
Jed Conklin for NPR

In 1984, attorney Magar Magar bought the park, and McGraw and longtime Syringa residents say the community began falling apart. The streets started crumbling, and now there are potholes everywhere. The swimming pool filled with scum and was shut down. Sewage would gush occasionally from pipes or out of the ground. And one morning, just before Christmas 2013, residents went to their toilets and taps and discovered they had no water.

"We were without water for 90 days," Tachell says. Local officials brought unheated outhouses for residents to use. The temperature dropped one day to minus 10 degrees.

Residents like James Ware, who has filmed some of the sewage leaks, say they had been warning government officials for years that there were chronic problems in Syringa. Ware says he pleaded with them to "get after this." But little changed.

"I cannot tell you how mad I've been at these people," he says.



James Ware (lower right), a 17-year resident of Syringa Mobile Home Park, has been documenting the chronic problems there for years. In the past, drinking water was deemed unsafe. The owners have since repaired the well water system but Ware still refuses to drink it, consuming store-bought water instead. *Jed Conklin for NPR*

NPR obtained documents from state agencies and courts that suggest Ware has reason to be mad. During the past 30 years, state inspectors have repeatedly found that Syringa's owner was breaking drinking water laws. For instance, inspectors sometimes found that he wasn't testing the water like he was supposed to. Other times the water was actually contaminated with illegal levels of coliform bacteria, the bacteria that come

from fecal matter. State officials told residents to boil their water, to make sure they wouldn't get sick.

Syringa's owner lives in Vancouver, Wash., hundreds of miles from his business. We tried to talk with him, but he didn't answer our registered letter or phone calls. McGraw says when water taps at the mobile home park went dry three years ago he called a key official at the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality and asked what state officials were doing about Syringa's owner.

"And the guy from DEQ said, 'Well, I sent him a very strongly worded letter about a year ago,' " McGraw recounts. "And I said, 'Well, what response did you get?' He said, 'Well, he never responded.' And I said, 'So what are you going to do now?' And he says, 'Well, I guess I'll send him a more strongly worded letter,' " McGraw says, laughing.

Barry Burnell, administrator of DEQ's water quality division in Boise, says it's important to understand the state's strategy: Officials want to persuade business owners like Magar to comply with the law voluntarily. Burnell says it costs a lot of money to take owners to court. And, he says, most owners end up cooperating with state officials and fixing their problems. He says Magar is an exception.



The ponds located at Syringa Mobile Home Park are used as sewage treatment. During the last 30 years, state inspectors have repeatedly found that the community's owner was breaking drinking water laws.

Jed Conklin for NPR

"I think that our expectation is that [Magar] is going to comply with the drinking water rules," Burnell says.

But state officials lost their patience almost three years ago and took Magar to court. The Idaho Conservation League also sued Magar for allegedly letting Syringa's sewage system pollute a nearby river. And a legal aid clinic at the University of Idaho law school filed a class action lawsuit against Magar, on behalf of Syringa's residents. That suit asks the court to order Magar not only to fix the problems at Syringa, but to award financial damages to its residents.

Just four days before the class action lawsuit was scheduled to go to trial, Magar declared bankruptcy. Court documents show he's worth millions of dollars. But under federal bankruptcy laws, Magar's tactic has managed to put the lawsuits against him temporarily on hold.

And now there's a surprising development: Magar's 26-year-old daughter says she wants to fix up Syringa and make it nice again — with her father's begrudging approval.



James Ware (left) speaks with fellow Syringa resident Reggie Thistlewait. Ware had been warning government officials for years that there were chronic problems in Syringa, but little had changed.

Jed Conklin for NPR

"I've definitely felt kind of responsible for my dad's past actions," says Shelley Magar, who was living with her boyfriend in the Cayman Islands when they learned her father was facing legal trouble.

She says they moved back to the U.S. and are now living with him. She says residents of Syringa and government officials misunderstand her father's motives.

"My dad is definitely a businessman and I think that his intentions have always been good, but that he's always been supercheap," she says. "Growing up, we didn't do family vacations; we didn't have a really nice house. Like, it was a struggle to get him to pay for back-to-school shopping. The level of that ... cheapness was just crazy."

Some residents believe Shelley Magar is genuinely trying to revive their community. They note that she and her boyfriend have called an engineer and met with state officials to discuss ways to fix the sewage and water problems. But others, like Ware, say she's just doing the minimum possible to get the courts off her family's back. "She's in this for herself," says Ware. "She's just interested in whatever she can salvage out of her inheritance."

Whatever happens, it spotlights the biggest problem with manufactured housing communities: The residents are at the owner's mercy when it comes to their daily quality of life.

Residents of Syringa say it would be tough to move anywhere else. As the park has deteriorated, they say, unsavory characters have moved in — local law enforcement officials say they have made frequent visits to Syringa to deal with fights, theft and other alleged crimes. As a result of those cascading problems, home values have plunged and residents can't sell their houses for more than a fraction of what they paid. And despite the nickname, *mobile* home, it costs thousands of dollars to move one. So residents say they feel trapped.



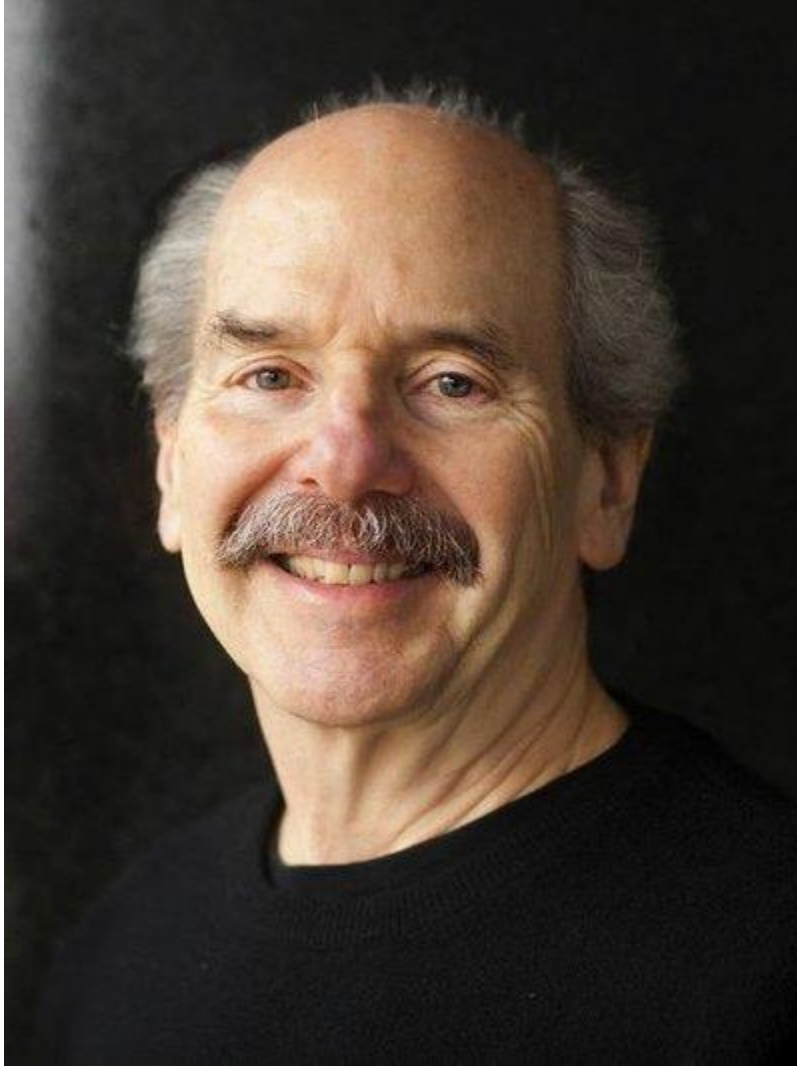
Wind chimes hang from Dawn Tachell's front porch.

Jed Conklin for NPR

"If I were to abandon my trailer, there's no place for me to go," Tachell says. "Except into the homeless shelter. I'm not going back there again."

Just days before Christmas, Syringa received notice of another broken water line. The community's management taped a flyer to residents' front doors: "Do not drink the water without boiling it first."

Jani Actman and Riley Beggin contributed research to this story.



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Kainaz Amaria/NPR

Daniel Zwerdling

Correspondent, Investigations Unit

Daniel Zwerdling is a correspondent in NPR's Investigations Unit.

He's one of the best known and most acclaimed investigative journalists in America. Since Zwerdling joined NPR in 1980, his reports have repeatedly attracted national attention and generated national action. Along the way, they've won every major award in broadcasting.

In late 2015, for example, the Secretary of the Army agreed to launch a top level investigation after Zwerdling reported (in collaboration with Colorado Public Radio) that the Army has kicked out tens of thousands of troops after they came back from the wars with mental health problems or brain injuries. Early the same year, Zwerdling's five-part series revealed that more nursing workers get debilitating back and arm injuries than any other occupation, and those injuries are caused mainly by lifting and

moving patients. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration announced soon afterward that the NPR series spurred them to launch the first federal program to investigate what hospitals are doing to protect their staff, and to fine hospitals with major problems.

Zwerdling's earlier series on the domestic impact of the wars (some in collaboration with ProPublica) revealed that the military failed to diagnose and treat tens of thousands of troops with traumatic brain injuries from explosions. Some of those stories, which prompted Congressional investigations of major army bases and Senate hearings, led the Pentagon to change the way it treats brain injury victims.

In late 2004, Zwerdling revealed that the Department of Homeland Security had been detaining immigrants in harsh conditions in jails across the United States. The day after Zwerdling reported that guards at one jail were using attack dogs to terrorize non-citizens, the Bush administration banned the use of dogs around detainees. And after he exposed another jail where guards beat detainees while a group of other guards watched, the jail announced that it would discipline almost a dozen employees.

In 1986, Zwerdling and NPR's Howard Berkes broke the story revealing that NASA officials launched the ill-fated space shuttle Challenger despite warnings that it might explode, as it eventually did. Their stories helped influence the federal investigation into the tragedy. Zwerdling's investigative series on the then-best-selling pesticide Chlordane revealed that the chemical was poisoning people and forcing them to abandon their homes. The stories prompted the manufacturer to remove the chemical from the market at the urging of the Environmental Protection Agency.

Zwerdling has won the most prestigious awards in broadcasting, including the DuPont, Peabody, Polk, Edward R. Murrow, Investigative Reporters and Editors, the Robert F. Kennedy and DART awards for investigative reporting. He won the Overseas Press Club Foundation award for live coverage of breaking international news, the American Association for the Advancement of Science Journalism Award, the National Press Club Award for consumer reporting, the Ohio State awards for international reporting, the James Beard award for reporting on the food industry, and the Champion-Tuck Award for economic reporting. He's been twice nominated for an Emmy.

From 2002 to 2004, he was NPR's television correspondent on PBS' *NOW with Bill Moyers*, on PBS. Prior to his television work, Zwerdling was host of NPR's *Weekend All Things Considered*, a post he held from 1993-1999. For more than a decade before that, Zwerdling covered environmental, health, science, and Third World development issues as an investigative reporter for NPR News. He was NPR's roving Africa correspondent based in Nairobi, Kenya for four of those years as he examined nations struggling to develop across Africa and South Asia.

Before joining NPR in 1980, Zwerdling worked as a staff writer at *The New Republic* and as a freelance reporter. His work appeared in national publications such as *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The New York Review of Books*. His groundbreaking articles in the early 1970s, examining evidence suggesting that the typical American diet contributed to cancer and heart disease, incurred the wrath of the medical and food industries. When Zwerdling reported that successful commercial farmers in the United States and Europe had stopped using chemicals and were farming organically, the pesticide industry lambasted him, but the U.S. Department of Agriculture launched an investigation that confirmed his findings.

Zwerdling has served as an adjunct professor of Media Ethics in the communications department at American University in Washington, D.C., and as an associate of the Bard College Institute for Language and Thinking in New York. His book, *Workplace Democracy* (Harper & Row, 1980), has been widely used in colleges across the country. He has taught workshops and given speeches at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, the University of California and other universities across the country.

Sources: NPR. Posted on the Manufactured Housing Industry Daily Business News, on MHPProNews, as part of a news analysis, under fair use guidelines. Original story, is linked below.

<http://www.npr.org/2016/12/26/502590161/mobile-home-park-owners-can-spoil-an-affordable-american-dream>

<http://www.npr.org/people/4173096/daniel-zwerdling>