

Nashville-area mobile home parks ride demand for affordable housing

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Families and singles have found what they were looking for in mobile homes. Larry McCormack / The Tennessean

Operator UMH Properties seeks to add 550 manufactured homes in Nashville area, shed "trailer park" perception



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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Mobile park operators are trying to shed the "trailer park" image with better quality homes.**
 - **Locally, UMH Properties is looking to expand Holiday Village, Trailmont and Countryside Village.**
 - **Billy Donald and his family recently moved to Clarksville because they couldn't find an affordable home in Nashville.**
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- **Warren Buffet's Berkshire Hathaway is among key players in the manufactured housing market.**

Before moving into a rental manufactured house at the Shady Hills mobile home park off Dickerson Pike, Frankie Robinson had a negative perception of such dwellings and the people who live there.

"I was just thinking of trailer trash and it just wasn't for me," said the onetime townhome resident and small business owner who has experienced friendly neighbors in her community of just over a year.

Robinson, who rents her two bedroom, two bathroom mobile home at Shady Hills for \$750 a month, is among a growing number of Nashville area residents now seeing manufactured housing at mobile home parks as an alternative to apartments and single-family homes that have been rising sharply in costs.

To meet rising demand, Shady Hills' Freehold, N.J.-based owner UMH Properties Inc. wants to expand a trio of Nashville area mobile parks to accommodate more than 550 new manufactured homes. On Thursday, the Metro Planning Commission recommended that the Metro Council approve UMH's request for a rezoning to allow 56 more homes at its 130-home Trailmont community in Goodlettsville.

Early next year, the commission will take up a request to add 155 mobile homes to UMH's 276-unit Holiday Village community on Grizzard Avenue, northwest of Dickerson Pike. And in Columbia, Tenn., the mobile home park landlord is seeking to double homes at its 348-unit Countryside Village park.

"Nashville is a wonderful market for us," said Jeffrey V. Yorick, UMH's vice president for engineering, citing local growth as driving the company's expansion plans. "It's the economy in Nashville — employers moving to the area, redevelopment is occurring all across the region."



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Cesar Melchor and wife Maria Gomez take a walk around the Shady Hills mobile park neighborhood with two of their children, Jacob and Natalia. (Photo: Larry McCormack / The Tennessean)

Tony Clouse, owner of W.C. Co., which runs five mobile home communities in the Nashville area, however, said regulations that Metro has placed on the industry has made it difficult to develop new parks in Davidson County.

"The surrounding counties are going that way too," he said, citing Cheatham as an example. "At one time, Dickerson Road had six retail dealers that sold mobile homes. There's none in Davidson County today."

Strong rental demand in Nashville

Under its business model, UMH develops lots and buys and installs mobile homes that are offered for sale or rent. Nationwide, at least half of the residents in the company's mobile home parks own their homes. Some owners bought with cash while other buyers obtained loans at interest rates up to 10 percent.

In the Nashville area, Yorick said UMH is seeing strong demand for rental mobile homes with monthly rents around \$700 to \$900 a month at its communities. Generally, the company sees conventional apartments as its main competitor and tries to set its monthly rents below rates such properties charge.

Cesar Melchor wanted more space and value for his money when he left a rental single-family home in Antioch two years ago for a four bedroom mobile home at Shady Hills that he rents for \$1,200 a month.

"I have children and it was a little bit difficult to live there with children," said the self-employed cleaning services franchisee who lives with his wife, Maria Gomez, and their five children. "You can't make any noise because you've got neighbors at the top and the bottom."

Melchor, who used the phrase "cardboard houses" to describe his misconceived notion before walking into a manufactured home, now has aspirations of buying their current mobile home in the coming year.

On a recent Saturday morning, Robinson brought a friend who was visiting from Chicago to the Shady Hills mobile park community's office to inquire about availability of a rental unit. Like Billy Donald and his girlfriend, Rachel Morgan, they learned that there was no availability at the park.

"We looked and couldn't find anything two bedrooms for under \$1,000 a month in a good neighborhood in Nashville," said Donald, who had to move outside of the city to a leased, \$675-a-month two-bedroom apartment in Clarksville that provides shelter for him, his partner of 12 years and their three children.



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Cesar Melchor and wife Maria Gomez take a walk around their Shady Hills Mobile Home Park neighborhood with two of their children Jacob and Natalia. (Photo: Larry McCormack / *The Tennessean*)

A billion-dollar plus business

After acquiring five Nashville-area mobile home parks from other companies on the heels of the most recent U.S. housing market downturn, UMH Properties became the largest operator locally in that niche.

The real estate investment trust has been among consolidators in the industry, which is valued at \$3.2 billion a year alone in terms of mobile homes sold. Other key players include billionaire investor Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway, which owns large builder Clayton Homes and financier 21st Mortgage.

In metro Nashville, there were 38,348 mobile homes last year with a median value of \$68,300, up 6.6 percent from 35,986 such homes in 2011, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2015 American Community Survey five-year estimates.

Frank Rolfe, co-founder of the nation's fifth largest owner of mobile home parks Mobile Home University, estimates that 6 percent to 8 percent of Americans live in such dwellings. "It's a least expensive way to live," he said, citing renters dissatisfaction with Class B and C apartments among factors driving demand. "You get no one kicking on your ceiling or walls, you get your own yard and to park by your front door."

In recommending approval of the zoning change to allow 56 more homes at UMH's Trailmont park, the Metro Planning Department's staff referred to mobile home parks as an affordable housing option. The mobile home communities providing housing for people of all income levels is consistent with the city's NashvilleNext 25-year growth plan, the staff said.

'Changing perceptions'

Industry players prefer using "manufactured homes" to distinguish the dwellings from older "trailers" and to erase references to the communities as trailer parks, an image fueled by shows such as "Trailer Park Boys."

They also cite the homes being built to comply with U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development standards. But it's clear that not all mobile home parks are equal as evident by the less attractive-looking W.C. Mobile Home Community across Dickerson Pike from Shady Hills.

Gail Newman has lived at UMH's Holiday Village for 38 years with her husband William and mobile home parks overall since the '70s. She recalls when living at so-called trailer parks conjured images of being a second-class citizen, a drug addict or someone with no teeth who lived off the streets and didn't work.

Affordability and proximity to their jobs at the time drew the couple now 48 years married into renting and later purchasing their first mobile home at a now erstwhile trailer park on Fesslers Lane off Murfreesboro Road. "You sort of didn't let anybody to know that you lived in one because the stigma was that bad," said Newman, 68.

She's seen sharp improvements at Holiday Village since UMH took over ownership of the community, which Newman recalled once had a bad reputation for drug-related activities with police around all the time.

"The thing that makes me mad about the news is when they refer to a home in a mobile park, they call it trailer," Newman said, adding that relatives are often surprised by the quality when they visit. "A trailer is pulled by a hitch and travels. A mobile home is on a foundation and it's secured. You don't move it."

Robinson added she likes having neighbors who visit each other and care for their homes at Shady Hills. "It's a community of mobile homes and the people who live there," she added. "It's become a neighborhood."

Reach [Getahn Ward](#) at 615-726-5968 and on Twitter [@getahn](#).

Nashville metro area mobile homes

Last year, mobile homes accounted for 5 percent of the region's housing stock.

2015, 38,348

2014, 38,822

2013, 38,680

2012, 35,054

2011, 35,986

2010, 35,497

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey five-year estimates

UMH Properties' Nashville area mobile home parks (number of homes)

Shady Hills (Nashville), 215

Trailmont (Goodlettsville), 130

Holiday Village (Nashville), 276

Weatherly Estates (Lebanon), 270

Countryside Village (Columbia), 348

* UMH is looking to add 56 mobile homes at Trailmont, 155 at Holiday Village and about 350 at Countryside Village park.

SOURCE: UMH Properties

(MHPNews.com Editor's Notes: The Tennessean's article, above, is reproduced here under fair use guidelines. While both the above and the NPR stories have problematic issue of using improper nomenclature, the article above is almost the opposite of what NPR's local affiliate broadcast and published. See the other article from the link below.

Note that the reason that nomenclature matters is because the proper terminology determines what code a home was built to, there have been [no “mobile homes” built in the U.S. for over 40 years.](#) The video interview with a [long-time federal official, linked here, describes the differences between manufactured homes, mobile homes and conventional housing.](#)

<http://www.mhprnews.com/blogs/daily-business-news/npr-mhaction-memo-cities-raise-fees-close-manufactured-home-communities-too>)