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Along the Gulf

NEWS OF OUR REGION

Residents Take Over Mobile Home Park

ENGLEWOOD

The residents of Gulf-to-Bay mobile home park on Manasota Key officially became owners of their park Thursday, at a ceremony marking the \$3.25 million purchase.

The homeowners association board of directors signed the papers converting it to the Gulf-to-Bay Cooperative Inc., marking the end of eight months of negotiations.

Almost 75 percent of the 113 homeowners have joined in the purchase.

Allison Brown, president of the homeowners association, said she expects the remaining property owners to buy in soon.

"We've already launched into the business of running the park," Brown said.

"There have been a lot of volunteers beautifying the area, cleaning out park buildings, and painting. The very fact that there were 65 members at today's meeting is evidence there's a lot of excitement."

The homeowners association incorporated in 1984, with the idea that if the park's owner, Jack Giguere, ever put the park up for sale, the residents would have a chance to buy it, Brown said.

Gulf-to-Bay is just north of Englewood Public Beach.

Purchase spares slice of paradise

When Gulf-to-Bay Mobile Home Park came up for sale, the residents decided to buy it. They paid it off 15 years early.

By James Roland
STAFF WRITER

Alison Brown and her Gulf-to-Bay Mobile Home Park neighbors watched with dread each time a new condominium sprang up on Manasota Key.

Their quaint little park, built during Florida's first building boom just after World War II, seemed in danger of becoming a casualty of the 1980s construction craze. So in 1984, park residents organized and began considering the previously unthinkable: Why not buy the park from owner Jack Giguere?

"Our residents began to worry that our paradise was going to disappear," Brown said. "Once we organized, we sent letters to Mr. Giguere saying that if he ever wanted to sell, we hoped he'd give us first dibbles. And he did."

A visitor to the park's clubhouse last November would have seen a Korb-fueled celebration of the residents' efforts.

A copy of the mortgage went up in flames, the champagne corks popped and the self-reliant residents proudly took ownership of their slice of paradise.

Four months later, residents of the little Manasota Key park are still in a celebratory mood.

"It's the result of a lot of hard work from all members of the park," said Bob Sternburgh, president of the Gulf-to-Bay board of directors. "We're very excited."

And why not? The 113-site "adult senior park" was paid off five years from the date of purchase — 15 years ahead of schedule.

"We accomplished something that a



STAFF PHOTO: JUDIE SKELICORN

Don Pease, left, and Jim Neff build cabinets for Neff's kitchen at Gulf-to-Bay Mobile Home Park. Residents volunteer to maintain the park.

lot of people said was impossible," said Les Downing, who with Alison Brown and Freeman Crosby spearheaded the purchase.

For seven years, property owners waited for their chance. It came when West Charlotte Utilities announced that hooking up the park to central sewer service would cost about \$750,000; the owner said he wanted to sell.

Giguere of Boca Grande and the residents' association, with the help of Sara-

sota attorney Harlan Domber, negotiated a \$4 million purchase, which included the sewer connections.

Individual lots were sold for between \$31,961 and \$46,175, amounts that included sewer charges and legal fees. In five years, all the lots sold — most to current residents.

"During that time, everything was completely redone," said board member

PLEASE SEE PARK ON 4A

Mobile home park in residents' hands

PARK FROM 1A

Dick Leper. "We didn't let anything go while we paid off the mortgage."

Residents are quick to point out that all work is done through volunteer labor. There is no paid manager, and the residents look for bargains wherever they can find them.

"It's been a cooperative effort," Brown said. "We haven't spent any money needlessly."

To explain why the lots sold so quickly, Sternburgh points to a line from a copy of "The Listening Post," the park newsletter. The line reads, "... it is probably the only spot in southwestern Florida which has the beautiful Gulf on one side and Lemon Bay on the other."

Most of the homes are next to the bay side of Manasota Key, a shell's throw north of Englewood Public Beach. The gulf side of the park includes a hut where folks gather to

watch sunsets.

On the bay side, a narrow road winds past the boat docks and through the park, a sun-splashed little enclave surrounded by multi-story condominium developments and dotted with palm trees. Lawn chairs occupy the shady portions of manicured yards, and bicycles or tricycles are parked next to homes.

It's the kind of place where a resident can pop open the hood of his car and have two or three helpers in minutes. And a calendar of activities includes rehearsals and performances of the Kitchen Band and Chorus, bingo, arts and crafts, line dancing, card games, exercise classes, monthly group dinners, shuffle board leagues, and the list goes on. The latest project calls for the renovation of the recreation hall.

Although the residents take great pride in what they have accomplished on their own, they cannot

say enough good things about attorney Harlan Domber.

"He was the one who really helped us out," Downing said. "Make sure you get his name."

Domber recalled the day of the closing with fondness. Some board members attended the daylong event, while other residents waited anxiously at the park, ready to celebrate.

"It was a very happy day for me," he said. "They have a great story to tell. A lot of them never thought they'd have an opportunity to own those properties."

Domber added that the Gulf-to-Bay purchase was paid off faster than any of the dozens with which he has been involved.

"They've done very well," he said. "They're a very congenial group of homeowners and they've managed to preserve their lifestyle."