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OPINION

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Dick Spotswood: Former Novato officials step up for mobile-park residents



Marin Valley Mobile Country Club in Novato, Calif. on Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2025. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)



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The saga of Marin Valley Mobile County Club on Novato's southeast side just took an explosive turn.

The community has 400 residents. All are 55 years of age and older. Of the 313 households, 91% meet the definition of low income. In 1997 the city assisted Marin Valley's residents to purchase the land on which the resident-owned mobile homes are sited.

The city arranged the financing, \$17 million in Bank of Marin bonds. Principal and interest were to be paid exclusively by residents' rent payments, which also funded park operation, maintenance and capital improvements, as well as to reimburse the city for staff time incurred. The debt, essentially a mortgage, will be fully paid next year with not a cent of city money involved.

The tenants, via their nonprofit homeowners association, the Park Acquisition Corp., believe that with the debt's payoff, the 1997 commitment should be honored. They contend that a promise: Upon the mortgage being paid, Marin Valley's land would be transferred to the PAC.

The city disagrees, contending that there's no proof that a cash-free transfer was ever an enforceable promise. Unfortunately, the parties failed to prepare documents to memorialize this understanding,

What did the city promise the residents in 1997? At the April 14 council session, former Novato Mayor Bernard Meyers presented a signed declaration from Rod Wood, Novato's city manager from 1993 to 2004.

Wood's declaration: "I was directly involved in the purchase and financing of the Marin Valley Mobile Home Park in 1996 and

1997. The city was informed of residents' serious concerns about rising rents, inadequate maintenance, and rumors that the park might be sold for redevelopment. This was brought to our attention by Councilmember Pat Eklund and others. Residents feared being forced to sell their mobile homes or face displacement.

1. The City Council, acting through the Redevelopment Agency, decided to support residents in pursuing a similar arrangement while incorporating an affordable housing component for qualifying tenants. The Agency worked with resident representatives and consultants to arrange financing and complete the purchase. To preserve the public purpose of the financing, the City could not precondition a transfer of ownership until the transaction closed. The City informed residents that, at the appropriate time after financing was secured, the park would be sold to a nonprofit entity at a nominal price to protect long-term affordability.

2. Financing was completed in 1997. Residents, through increased rents, were to pay off the debt in full over the subsequent years (with the loan fully satisfied by 2027). There may be some incidental costs (e.g., sewer repairs) for which, if warranted, residents should reimburse the City, but the arrangement was effectively a "self-help" program: residents funded the purchase through their rent payments, with no net cost to the City beyond initial financing support.

3. The City should honor its original intent and transfer the park to a nonprofit entity at cost to preserve affordability in perpetuity. This action would fully align with state law and the City's Housing Element obligations to accommodate affordable housing."

Wood's recollection is solid proof of the city's intentions in 1997. If it breaks this promise, there's a message to Novato citizens

that what a city council and its staff says in the first year need not be honored in subsequent years.

City staff may argue that honoring this commitment gives away an asset. If the city rejects their promise, when the debt loan is fully paid in 2027, the tenants' rent will go to the city's general fund.

Meyers told the council, "The city should begin a thoughtful process to examine how the original vision for Marin Valley can now be completed — one that protects the city's interests while ensuring that this community remains secure and affordable for the residents who made the purchase possible and their successors."

Columnist Dick Spotswood of Mill Valley writes on local issues Sundays and Wednesdays. Email him at spotswood@comcast.net.