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Time for a Makeover?

A thorough assessment of your community will dictate your course of action

Q I want to upgrade an older land-lease community that I now own. Where should I start?

A One of the most difficult issues facing the manufactured housing industry today is the presence of many older, unattractive land-lease communities on the nation's landscape. Upgrading and improving these communities is important for several reasons. From an industry perspective, the negative impact that these communities have on efforts to rezone land for future projects is legendary. The "trailer park" image of some of these older communities is often the biggest spoken or implied argument against proposed modern community developments. From an investor perspective, many of these older developments are losing value because of their inability to accommodate newer, larger homes and the negative image created by the aging asset and the older homes in them.



So, how do we go about making a change for the better in these older communities? The first step in the process is deciding the extent of the makeover. The activity could be as simple as a cosmetic enhancement of the existing facility or as complex as a complete retrofit requiring the removal of the existing homes and a planned redo of the community and infrastructure to accommodate new, larger homes. This initial decision will determine your course of action.

In the past twenty years our firm has prepared upgrade documents for many projects, large and small, across the country. All of the projects have begun with a thorough assessment of the community. The first step in the process is the accumulation of the most complete maps and information on the community as possible. In many cases this involves digging deep into office closets, calls to the design engineer or planner, or trips to the municipal or state agency to acquire archived copies of the

approved construction plans. Conversations with managers and maintenance personnel further complete the base plans. Often, when drawings aren't available, enlarged aerial photographs acquired from governmental sources are utilized to create base maps (pictured below). These documents can help you get a clearer picture of the challenges you may face, as well as point to some potential problem areas that are not obvious visually. A thorough site inspection and verification completes the process.

A picture is worth a thousand words. Next, walk the site with camera and note pad in hand. Pictures have a way of focusing our vision on negative images we have grown to accept and can save additional trips to the site to refresh our memory of forgotten details. These maps, pictures and notes not only provide a valuable resource in times of community crisis and a foundation for the work to follow, but they also become a base against which to measure our future progress.

It is unlikely that the community's image would have declined through time without the homes and homesites actually declining. It's helpful, therefore, to consider the need for community renewal on two levels: items of owner/management responsibility and items of resident responsibility. With this in mind we will create our upgrade plan with an emphasis on short-term goals to produce immediate visual results and long-term goals to achieve the desired community end result. Using this approach, the management example of immediate visual improvement can be used as justification for required resident home and site improvements. We must lead by example if we are to be successful in this effort.

In the next issue we will discuss the actual upgrade planning process.

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