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Rancho Mirage promised affordable housing, but land remains empty. Now the city's being sued



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Key Points

- The city bought Rancho Palms Mobile Home Park in 2009, saying homes there were too old and needed to be demolished.
 - Once the land was empty, the city settled a lawsuit in part by promising to allow 126 new homes at the site.
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The last resident who remained in a now-vacant mobile home park in Rancho Mirage has renewed her legal fight with city officials, alleging they failed to follow through on a commitment to promptly redevelop the land into affordable housing.

The former site of the Rancho Palms Mobile Home Park, a 126-unit neighborhood off Peterson Road that consisted of many native Spanish speakers and families with young children, has been owned by the city since 2009, when the mobile home park was still open.

Following the purchase, the city's housing authority owned the park itself, but not the mobile homes, which belonged to residents. At the time, city officials said the homes were too old to be inhabitable much longer, and they planned to redevelop the land into affordable housing for seniors.

So gradually, the housing authority purchased occupied homes from their owners, then razed the vacant coaches they left behind. A 2019 investigation by The Desert Sun found the city had spent roughly \$11 million on the park over the prior decade.

Remaining residents slowly left, and by 2013, only one family — Veronica Juarez, her husband and her four children — was still there. They departed Rancho Palms for Cathedral City in 2017.

More: A now-vacant mobile home park has cost Rancho Mirage \$11 million over the past ten years

But years before, Juarez and four other residents had filed suit against the city, alleging violations of state law meant to protect mobile home park residents. After several years in court, the city agreed to a settlement worth \$500,000 in April 2019.

But another part of that settlement — in which the city agreed to issue a building permit to start construction on 126 new affordable housing units at the site within two years, by April 2021 — spurred Juarez to file a new complaint last summer, alleging the city had not completed those terms.

‘A six-foot garden wall’ and 126 homes

The complaint, filed in June in Riverside County Superior Court, alleges the city specifically violated two terms of the settlement agreement: the provision to issue a new building permit for the site within two years, along with a clause giving Juarez and the other plaintiffs first access to that housing.

The city, in its court filings, responded that there has been "little interest" in the private sector in constructing and operating affordable housing in Rancho Mirage.

“Prior to approving building permits for affordable housing projects, a developer must apply for them,” the city said in one of its responses last fall. “The City cannot approve a permit without a suitable and appropriate project application.”

In the legal dispute, city officials have also pointed to steps taken by the Rancho Mirage City Council, which acts as the city’s housing authority, in March 2021 as evidence of its compliance with the settlement agreement.

That's when the council adopted the official Former Rancho Palms Mobilehome Park Replacement Housing Plan and directed staff “to immediately issue the requisite building permits” to start construction on 126 affordable housing units.

A building permit was issued for the site soon after that meeting — but solely for the installation of "a six-foot garden wall at the east end of the property,” according to Juarez’s

complaint.

“Although Ms. Juarez is not an architect or building code specialist, upon information and belief, a six-foot garden wall cannot accommodate 126 affordable housing units for families,” the complaint states.

City plan calls for 1,741 new homes this decade

Regarding the lawsuit, Rancho Mirage City Attorney Steve Quintanilla told The Desert Sun this week “it is not the city’s policy to comment on pending litigation,” and pointed to Rancho Mirage’s latest Housing Element, a long-term plan mandated by the state and adopted by the council in early 2022.

“The Housing Element illustrates the City’s commitment to meeting its affordable housing requirements, which the State has approved,” Quintanilla said in an email.

The city’s latest Housing Element, for the eight-year cycle from 2022 to 2029, calls for 1,741 housing units, the majority of which would be for people at very low-to-moderate income levels.

The state-approved plan identifies the Rancho Palms site as one of the main parcels where some of that new housing inventory could go, but that plan faced pushback from residents when the council adopted the Housing Element last year.

More: Rancho Mirage approves affordable housing plan, including protested properties. Here's why

The residents’ concerns largely focused on neighborhood density issues, with the state requiring up to 28 units per acre for new housing, opening the door for multi-story apartment buildings in areas where there are currently single-story dwellings.

Many residents instead encouraged the council to look at other options, including 50 acres of city-owned land near the dog park on Key Largo.

Despite residents’ complaints, the council moved ahead with its housing plan, telling the public it had little choice. However, while Housing Elements require local governments to produce lengthy reports of their plans, the state-mandated process does little to hold them accountable for any subsequent construction.

For example, in the housing cycle from 2006 to 2014, Rancho Mirage built about 12% of the needed homes identified in its Housing Element for that period, according to a Los Angeles Times investigation into the statewide policy.

Annette Harings, the attorney representing Juarez, noted that of the four affordable housing properties owned by the city's Housing Authority, all of them are for income-restricted people ages 55 and above.

There are also four privately-run affordable housing complexes in the city, three of which are available to income-restricted people of any age. One of those complexes was at risk of becoming market-rate in 2015, but the city intervened to keep it as designated affordable housing under a new owner, a city council report shows. The city also has rent-control protections over its other mobile homes parks, which accounted for roughly 6% of its housing inventory in 2020.

Still, Harings said the city's past actions at the mobile home park made it harder for working-class people to live in Rancho Mirage. She says for Juarez, who moved her family to Cathedral City after leaving the park, "this has never been about the money."

"It's about the principle, like (the city) destroyed the lives and community of 126 people, or families, and you just think you're going to walk away?" Harings said. "She wants to keep their feet to the fire, like you agreed to do this ... So do it."

"My thought has always been the Rancho Palms Mobile Home Park is ready to be reopened," she added. "Just open the gate."

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