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Community News

Mobile home owners could benefit from lawsuits

by Ayesha Ahmad

Staff Writer

Some residents in Laurel and elsewhere in Howard County may be eligible for settlements from class action lawsuits against mobile home distributors and installers filed by a Bethesda law firm.

Pels, Anderson & Lee L.L.C. won a \$2 million settlement against Chesapeake Mobile Homes Inc. this fall for faulty mobile home installation.

The lawsuit cites a requirement of Maryland code for mobile homes to have footing that extends below the area's established frost line — 30 inches in Howard County — and to have properly ventilated perimeter skirting.

The frost line installation requirement for homes, mobile homes and certain other buildings has been in place for years in Howard County, said Mike Evans, director of the county's Department of Inspections, Licenses and Permits. The county required for mobile homes to be installed in line with manufacturer's requirements, which included installing footing below the frost line.

But the county tightened its inspection requirements for mobile home installation in 2002, he added, because officials saw many mobile homes had been installed on a concrete pad on the ground, rather than below the frost line. Inspections are done when the home is being installed.

But the attorneys claimed that neither the frost line nor the skirting requirements were met by Chesapeake. Without those aspects, a mobile home can develop problems related to excess moisture, including warping, shifting and sinking.

The Anne Arundel County Circuit Court, where the first lawsuit was filed, approved the settlement amount this fall. Residents may file claims until Dec. 1 and receive \$1,100 to deal with problems with faulty installation.

The amount needed to fix the problems varies — attorney Jon Pels said it could reach \$5-10,000 to refit a mobile home, but smaller repairs to walls, doors and windows could cost in the hundreds of dollars.

The settlement could potentially reach 2,000 residents, but so far just over 100 have filed claims.

On the heels of that settlement, the firm has filed another lawsuit against Eastern Homes Inc. of Jessup.

"We would like residents of mobile home parks in Laurel and Howard County to call and see if we can help them," said attorney Larry Anderson.

Damages that can result from improper footing and skirting affects many aspects of a mobile home over time, Anderson said. Excess moisture warps windows, doors and their frames, and doors can stick or open and close mysteriously.

"In extreme circumstances, walls can begin to get mold on them," Anderson said.

At Aladdin Mobile Village on Washington Boulevard in Elkridge, many residents have had their homes leveled because the homes sink without proper footing, said Cindy Brown, vice president of Aladdin's homeowners' association.

"Your house becomes all un-level, your doors don't close properly... your ceilings crack, your walls crack," Brown said. "I just put out like \$300 to have mine leveled because mine [a double-wide mobile home] was sepa-

rating."

Brown said she had gotten her home from Chesapeake and was planning on contacting the law firm to find out if she could file a claim.

Firm aide Sam Hijab said while it may take some time to determine if a resident is eligible for the settlement money, it was worth it to apply. A resident can get \$100 simply for filing an eligible claim.

At Ev-Mar Mobile Village in Laurel, which was established in 1955, Vince Patrick, president of the Ev-Mar Village Residents Association, said there have never been footers below the frost line, but it has not caused any particular problems.

The Howard County code requirement in 2002, he said, was a "bit of overkill" and just raised costs for everybody. Along with normal installation costs, which vary depending on situation, it adds to the cost of installing the footers at \$100 per hole with 14 "pillars" for a normal home and 28 for a doublewide home.

"[But] it certainly removes any possibility of judgment error," he said.

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