

# Home sweet home out of reach in the Wood River Valley

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KETCHUM, IDAHO — Bertha Nunez doesn't fully grasp what is happening to her home of 16 years.

"We have to move," Nunez said in faltering English, shrugging her shoulders. Her 3-year-old granddaughter, Camilla, hugged her leg Wednesday as they stood on the porch of her home.

The Times-News reports the Nunez household is one of two dozen families facing eviction from the soon-to-close North Fork Trailer Park north of Ketchum.

The 3-acre park's aging sewage system that serves 22 units has been failing for years and its owners have given up the fight. Some of its 66 residents have already moved out of the crowded and rundown park. Some have nowhere to go. And some are in desperate situations, residents say.

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## Housing shortage

Trailer parks may seem a bit out of place among the homes of the rich and famous. But for many workers, trailer houses, camp trailers and recreational vehicles provide some of the only affordable housing available in the scenic and pricey Wood River Valley.

"At any given moment, there are 100 to 130 households in our database looking for housing," said Bobbi Bellows, program director for the Blaine County Housing Authority (BCHA). Some of these are bunking with family or friends. Some are renting but simply looking for something different. Others have outgrown their space and are looking for larger accommodations.

Displaced families from North Fork Trailer Park are now competing with many others on the housing authority's long waiting list to procure a roof over their heads.

Nunez and her husband, Daniel, own their small 1964 trailer house, but the home is in no condition to be moved. He works as a landscaper; she cares for their 2-month-old grandson and Camilla while their daughter works during the day. She says they plan to leave the trailer and move into their daughter's home.

But some North Fork residents are without options.

Heaven Brooke says hers is an "abominable and devastating situation."

Brooke found an eviction notice on her door giving her until Oct. 15 to get out. Others got similar notices, she said.

Brooke is ill and on disability, she says, and the typical rental apartment in Ketchum is financially out of her reach. She says she will soon be homeless.

"I'll be living in my car," she said earlier this month, "but the weather won't allow that for long."

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## Highest housing costs in the state

Blaine County's wages are the highest in the state, according to the Idaho Department of Labor. But so are the costs of living.

The lack of "affordable housing" — housing that costs 30 percent or less of a worker's gross income — is a real concern, says BCHA Executive Director Nathan Harvill, who is working with the county on various housing projects.

The National Low Income Housing Coalition ranks Blaine County's housing market as the most expensive in Idaho.

In Twin Falls County, the minimum wage needed to afford to rent a typical two-bedroom apartment is \$14.33, the coalition says. The state average is \$15.44.

But according to its figures, a worker in Blaine County must make \$19.54 per hour to afford the same apartment.

"We have a very high cost of living, and our wages don't meet the housing burden," Blaine County Commissioner Angenie McCleary said Monday. "Our wages aren't sufficient."

McCleary has lived in Blaine County since 1999 and has been a commissioner for 10 years.

"The cost of housing here is beyond what many workers make," she said.

The imbalance pushes many of the county's workers to commute from outside the Wood River Valley, says the Department of Labor.

"Housing is one of the largest issues facing the county," McCleary said. "Our community is very well aware of the need for more affordable housing."

But towns in the valley are smooshed between mountains, leaving little space to build, Harville said. One solution is to build up, not out, and to limit the number of single-family homes on sprawling acreages.

"There is limited land available for housing," he said. "We have a very interconnected economy. We need to be smart and allow for more density."

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## Alternative housing

The Sun Valley Resort is taking the housing shortage into its own hands, by constructing new dormitory-style housing for its employees. For now, the ski resort houses employees at the old Moritz Community Hospital.

But the new dorms won't reduce housing pressures in the beginning, said Jim Snyder, the resort's director of food and beverages. The old Moritz building — slated to be demolished in the spring — holds 500 beds. The new Aspen building, which is scheduled to open in mid-December, will hold 450.

But more phases of the the resort's housing project are coming. The Alpine building, which will offer apartment-style housing, is next in line after the Aspen building.

The county is also working on solutions, including a senior-housing project, McCleary said.

"This is a great area, but housing is certainly a challenge," she said. "This is an entire community issue that will require a collaboration — private and public, contractors and nonprofits — to fix."

Former North Fork resident Debbie ONeil has found new living space since she received her eviction notice.

"I consider myself fortunate," ONeil said. "I have a roof over my head."

But she's concerned about the others who have yet to find housing. Neighbors in the trailer park are like family, ONeil said.

"People are scared. Some are in dire straits."

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