

Dear Consumer

Mobile Home Stationary Investments

In 1933, mobile homes were called trailers, and the fledgling industry took a revolutionary step: doors were moved from the back to the side. This move separated kitchen from sleeping quarters and eliminated the danger of inhabitants stepping out into traffic. In 1980, nine out of 10 mobile homes stayed in one place and their inhabitants were in no danger of accidentally stepping from home to highway. While the industry has come a long way since 1933, mobile homes themselves aren't moving very far at all.

The original need for an easily movable home on wheels is being filled by recreational vehicles with mobile homes usually journeying only from factory dealership to permanent site.

Today's mobile homes come with varied exterior trims and interior designs. They may have wood burning fireplaces, bubble or bay windows, central vacuuming systems, built-in stereo systems, trash compactors, sunken bathtubs, even water beds.

Ten million Americans, many of them senior citizens, are presently living in mobile homes. Industry figures show that retired people represent 32 percent of mobile home dwellers, blue collar workers 37 percent, and white collar workers 15 percent. The median family income ranges from nine to ten thousand dollars annually.

According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), a quarter of a million new mobile homes were sold in 1980, at an average retail price of \$17,000 to \$20,000. In 1977, the Manufactured Housing Institute's (an industry trade association) figures show new mobile homes accounting for two-thirds of the housing available for sale under \$35,000. These figures, way below the average cost of a conventional house, have prompted some to call mobile homes the "last affordable homes in America."

Whether mobile homes are really the "last affordable homes" is a hotly argued issue among industry representatives, housing experts, and the FTC. And anyone considering buying a mobile home should know about laws, warranties, zoning, financing, and other issues unique to mobile home ownership.

Warranties

In 1976, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) issued safety and construction standards for major components of mobile homes. This legislation was intended to improve safety and to lessen the threat posed by fire or severe weather conditions. HUD's program requires that each home be inspected at the factory and that only safety-related defects be repaired. Repairs of defects commonly reported in new mobile homes (water leaks, non-working doors and windows, cracked ceilings and walls, damaged paneling, broken appliances, etc.) can be sought under the manufacturer's warranty but are not generally covered by HUD's program. Nor does HUD protect consumers against damage due to transportation and set-up (placement on the site or lot).

Warranties

The typical mobile home warranty runs for the first year of ownership and covers defects in both materials and workmanship. An FTC investigation revealed, however, that many mobile home manufacturers did not have effective warranty performance systems. FTC is proposing a trade regulation rule that would include the following:

- When a manufacturer delegates responsibility for warranty service to a dealer, the two parties sign a written agreement spelling out the warranty service obligations of each. Manufacturers would also be required to monitor their dealers' warranty repair service.
- Warranty repair service deadlines would be set. Emergency conditions, such as lack of heat, would have to be corrected within five days after notification to the manufacturer or dealer. Other repairs would have to be completed within 30 days.

In addition to dealer obligations, manufacturers who offer written warranties would be required to include transportation and set-up of the mobile home in their warranty coverage.

Repair service deadlines would have to be disclosed in the warranty, so consumers could enforce their rights.

Although FTC's proposal is not final, it raises points which the prospective mobile home buyer should consider when judging warranty coverage. Make sure you get any promises in writing.

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