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THE KEYS

MODULAR HOMES IN DEMAND



PHOTO BY MIAMI HERALD STAFF

ECONOMICAL OPTION: Modular homes, like this one on Big Coppitt Key, are being touted as manufactured homes that can withstand hurricanes-force winds.

BY LISA FUBS
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Big Coppitt Key — Modular homes, sold as safer and sturdier versions of mobile homes, are gaining ground in the Florida Keys with young families and retirees as an attractively affordable option in an overpriced paradise.

If they can cough up \$180,000 to \$250,000.

Concrete-block homes, generally regarded as the best at weathering the hurricanes that often sweep South Florida, start in the upper \$200,000s in the Keys — and that's often for a fixer-upper on a canal.

The average price for a one-bedroom concrete home, according to real estate experts, runs about \$100,000 for a modest two-bedroom, two-bath dwelling.

The big bottom line already has shut a lot of people out of the housing market. With Keys prices soaring and the cost of material and labor rising, local builders expect the number of modular homes to grow and per-

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haps even oupace new concrete homes.

Modular homes are "about the most affordable housing people can afford down here and they're getting superior quality for their money," said Jack Sweeting, owner of Sweetwater Homes on Big Coppitt Key, which has built more than 1,000 modular homes in the Keys.

"I've lived in one for the past five years and went through (Hurricane) Georges in it," he said. "Didn't lose one shingle."

Though they share the prefabricated heritage of mobile homes, manufacturers say modular homes are built today to withstand fierce weather conditions that could possibly turn a trailer into boards of scrap

aluminum. Though the industry has improved mobile home standards as well, they've consistently been among the most heavily damaged structures during hurricanes and tropical storms.

Modular homes typically cracked down from Central Florida in two or three large prebuilt pieces and assembled in place, with new construction to standards the industry claims will endure wind speeds as high as 170 mph.

Florida County Building Department official Joe Paskalk contends the performance of modular homes in recent storms has bolstered consumer confidence and brought more factory-produced homes to the Keys. Modular home statistics were not available for Monroe County.

For the most part, modular homes held up fairly well in Hurricane Georges, much better than they would have in the late 1980s, Paskalk said. "People aren't as afraid they'll blow away."

With options and landscaping upgrades, Keys builders and real estate agents are selling them with relative ease and handsome profit.

Sweeting is completing construction on an 1,800-square-foot modular home on Big Coppitt Key that cost him about \$270,000. He plans to list the three-bedroom, two-bath home later this month for about \$300,000.

Although this modular is on the high end, local real estate agents expect the value to rise — just like other pieces of precious real estate.

"They're increasing in value just like everything else in the Keys market," said Casie Williams, a real estate agent with Century 21, who has sold three modulars this year. "In many cases, it's the less expensive way to go, but you also get nice qual-

GOP keeps grip on power

Party dominates lawmaker rankings

BY LESLEY CLARK
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TALLAHASSEE — Republicans, led by Senate President John McKay and House Speaker Tom Feeney, held fast to the top spots in The Herald's 15th annual rankings of state lawmakers, while a host of fresh new faces in the House landed at the bottom of the list.

Rep. Bill C. Cook took all but two of the top 10 spots in the House and three of the top 10 in the Senate — a reflection of the GOP's continued dominance in both chambers. Still, two Democrats cracked the House's Top 10 in 2001 — two more than in 2000.

The pending leaders took the No. 1 spots in their respective chambers, though McKay's temporary tenure personally at odds for much of the session.

Feeney, a small-government, anti-tax advocate considering a run for Congress, recently passed a \$55 million tax break. McKay, who has no political aspirations beyond serving as Senate president, held one against tax breaks, arguing it was vital to push for a tax cut at the expense of spending on health and education. The chambers eventually agreed on a \$25 million tax cut — with the House putting more into education.

"John really stood out in the Senate

PHOTO BY MIAMI HERALD

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Ex-official Holmes didn't misuse city's gas pump

Two Herald stories published last year incorrectly reported that former Opa-Locka City Commissioner Timothy Holmes used city gas pump after leaving office.

The articles, which appeared on Feb. 27 and March 1, 2000, wrongly pumped a total of \$710 worth of gas during the 10 months after he left office on Nov. 4, 1998. The Herald regrets the error.

Holmes was elected to the commission in 1996 and was responsible for several public works and business development projects in the city.

After the two stories were published, Holmes read The Herald for defamation. As a result of a thorough investigation since the suit was filed, The Herald learned Holmes did not use the city gas pump during the 10-

PHOTO BY MIAMI HERALD

COMMUNITY CALENDAR

- ▶ **AMVETS Independence Post 39** of Key Largo, second and fourth Monday, 47 Post 19211, mile marker 102.5, 305-451-3184 (Frank).
- ▶ **Backgammon sessions**, 8-8 p.m. Tuesdays, Key Largo Community Park, 305-455-3422.
- ▶ **Bible courses** by mail, nondenominational, nonsectarian. Eight lessons, free. Write: Free Home Bible Course, 3 Burlington St., Key Largo, FL 33037 or call 305-451-1884.
- ▶ **Bridge** in the afternoon, 1-4 p.m. Tuesdays, Key Largo Civic Club. All ages welcome. 305-451-1884 (Betty Owen).
- ▶ **Bridge**, 7 p.m. Tuesdays at St. Justin Martyr Catholic Church, mile marker 105.9. Proceeds support the Keys Academy at St. Justin's, the new kindergarten through eighth-grade elementary school. 305-451-3416.
- ▶ **Blood drive**, 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Thursday, April 26, at 1300 Ave. W., Key Largo. Sponsored by the Homestead Christian Church, mile marker 88.8.
- ▶ **Girl Scouts Council of Tropical Florida** recruit state volunteers to work with girls ages 1-17. The Girl Scouts provide training, offers organized programs and events customized to age level.
- ▶ **Seeking volunteers** to visit senior citizens at their homes or in the nursing home for a couple hours a week. 305-453-1868 (Barbara Pike).
- ▶ **Florida Keys Herpetological Society** meets 7 p.m. the first Thursday, Homestead Library, 305-855-3625.
- ▶ **Florida Keys Masonic Lodge** 535, 8 p.m. second and fourth Tuesday, Masonic Temple behind Scott's, Tavernier. 305-852-8978.
- ▶ **Florida Native Plant Society**, 7 p.m. May 29, Marston High School cafeteria. Refreshments, talk on displaying and building a water garden. Refreshments, talk on displaying and building a water garden. 305-288-2310 (Lisa).
- ▶ **Friends of Key Largo Library** volunteer maintain a gift shop named Friday Things, in the library. Free-will shopping. Center, Choose from pottery and keys to Zuri Indian jewelry.
- ▶ **Friends of the Keys** offers informational weekly sessions at the home of Joe Givens. Sponsored by the Homestead Christian Church, mile marker 88.8.
- ▶ **Kiwanis Club** meets 11:45 a.m. Thursdays, Coconut Key Largo, mile marker 100. 305-482-6280 (Tim Bracker) or 305-491-8814 (Donna Casper).
- ▶ **Marathon Shrine Club** meets noon Fridays, Quay Restaurant, mile marker 54, Marathon. 282-742-0780 (Jim Sweeting).
- ▶ **Senior Group**, 10 a.m. Mondays, Key Largo library. Ages 50 and over. Programs feature speakers and activities. 262-48-1591 (Cathy Morrow) or 305-384-6008 (Catherine Gony).
- ▶ **Tropical Fruit and Vegetable Society** of the Beddars, 1:30 p.m. the last Wednesday, Fruit and Spice Park, 9499 SW 167th Ave., Homestead. 305-247-3772.
- ▶ **Toddler Tot On Society**, regular classes at Joyce Bennett School of Performing Arts, mile marker 86, ocean-side. 305-491-4962.
- ▶ **Upper Keys Anglers**, 6 p.m. third Wednesday, Coconut, mile marker 105 social meeting. 6:30 p.m. last Friday, Snapper's, 205-404-0041 (meetings that program).
- ▶ **Zonta Club**, an international organization in service to women, children and the community. Key Largo School Board Room, New Trans. Bldg., 800 Newland Blvd., 305-284-8822 (Gretchen Williams).
- ▶ **Marathon**, 8 p.m. third Tuesday, Southern Country Club, Upper Keys, 6:30 p.m. second Tuesday, Denny's Restaurant, mile marker 100.

- ▶ **305-253-4841, ext. 238** (Pauline Russell).
- ▶ **Island Outfitters**, 7 p.m. Tuesdays. Beginners welcome. 305-852-8525 (Betty) or 305-852-5588 (Peggy).
- ▶ **Key Largo Retirement Nature Walks**, 10 a.m. Thursdays and Sundays, meet at gate of the former Fort Bougainville Resort, Camp Road 101, North Key Largo. 305-451-1922.
- ▶ **Key Largo Lions Club**, 11:30 a.m. first Wednesday, Perry's of Key Largo restaurant, mile marker 102.8. 9:30 a.m. third Wednesday of the month, Lions Den Clubhouse, mile marker 100, behind 118 Bank Road 461-1271.
- ▶ **Key Largo Volunteer Fire Rescue's** annual Boat Drive. Fundraiser: 4-7 p.m. Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Saturday. Proceeds go to relocation program.
- ▶ **Keys Community Concert** Band practices: 7 p.m. Mondays, Key Largo School Board Room, New Trans. Bldg., 800 Newland Blvd., 305-453-7294 (Gloria Helzer).
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